

# CHRISTOLOGY IN CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE



# *Christology in Cultural Perspective*

MARKING OUT THE HORIZONS

Colin J. D. Greene

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Christology in Cultural Perspective  
Marking Out the Horizons  
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‘Dr Greene draws on a wide variety of theological, historical, and conceptual resources to explore a constructive approach to Christology and successive cultures. He rightly avoids exclusive alternatives between cosmological, anthropological, and political trajectories, and underlines their complementary character as indicating continuities with biblical and historical formulations relevant to our own day. This book repays careful study.’

Canon Anthony C. Thiselton, Emeritus Professor of Christian Theology in Residence, University of Nottingham.

‘Colin Greene’s magisterial work is far more than a conventional survey of what theologians have done with Christology, though it takes that in on the way. It is a challenge to several of the major assumptions that underlie the work not only of theologians but also of cultural critics, politicians, and opinion-formers in today’s world. It is, in other words, doing for today something of what the gospel writers did for their day: telling the story of Jesus in such a way as to blow open existing worldviews and propose fresh, startling perspectives in their place.’

Canon Tom Wright, Westminster Abbey, London.

*To Valerie, Peter, Kathryn and Naomi  
(we have one life but we carry each other)*

*In memory of Henry Greene*  
1923–1998

*and*

*Richard W.A. McKinney*  
1938–1996

*(the road has risen to greet them)*



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## Foreword

The figure of Jesus is a fascinating theological and cultural study, as he moves through every one of the past twenty centuries and is now present in every part of the world. I remember when giving a seminar on Jesus in the University of Beijing how very difficult it was to be sure that the main categories and concepts I was using really linked up with the students and staff present. There was a sense of the need for long, patient conversation about a wide range of matters, not all of them directly related to theology. In this book, Colin Greene has wisely not tried to cover all cultures. His main focus, the ways Jesus figured in the early centuries of Christianity and later in Western civilisation, is quite vast enough. He patiently enters into one period and theology after another, and sets up a wide-ranging conversation that centres on Jesus as the Christ of God.

The subject matter of the book is multifarious and many of the thinkers discussed are complex, but again and again Colin Greene manages to draw out the key issues and lays them out in a form that acts both as an educational introduction and a theological discussion. There are a number of basic cultural paradigms, whose differences set the scene for a confrontation between the diverse ways in which Jesus Christ has been understood. There is also the historical approach, examining how Jesus has featured in premodern, modern and post-modern theologies and cultures. Colin Greene describes the book as a journey, and it is one that faces the big problems, crossing the rough country and making the necessary detours.

One of the strengths of the book is that, for all its large scale, it continually engages in critical dialogue with specific thinkers. Colin Greene has read widely, and offers not just analyses and descriptions but also assessments of one theologian after another. As someone who tries to do Christology, I found myself repeatedly stimulated to think in new ways, either with or against particular thinkers. One of my own preoccupations is with the way the Bible is interpreted in Christology and, even though this is not a leading theme for Colin Greene, he continually provokes further thought about it.

The culmination of the book comes when a series of recapitulations of the previous chapters leads into suggestions for the reconstruction of Christology in the aftermath of postmodern deconstruction. This is one of the great challenges to contemporary theology, and Colin Greene has taken it up with energy, learning and insight.

David F. Ford  
Regius Professor of Divinity  
University of Cambridge

## Preface

The most profound, disturbing, prophetic and enduringly significant theological exploration is usually born out of a confrontation with specific cultural and historical contexts. From the apostle Paul to Tertullian, Ambrose and Augustine struggling with the idolatrous pretensions of the Holy Roman Empire, to the Reformers resistance to the heteronomy of the Roman Catholic Church, to Karl Barth and the Barmen declaration and the martyrdom of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, theology and successive theologians made a stand against cultural hegemony in the name of the crucified and risen Christ. Nothing pushes Christology back into the centre of theological concerns more than the threat of cultural domination and nothing removes Christology to the margins more than the scourge of cultural accommodation. Such insights have penetrated the theological convictions that lay behind both the conceiving and the writing of this particular book.

What began as an attempt to critically investigate and reconstruct the genesis and development of Christology from the biblical sources to the modern era, quickly moved on to an exploration of the specific cultural contexts that have dominated these concerns. It was then a short but nevertheless disconcerting step to discover the ideological subtext that undergirds such cultural referents and which often masquerades in the guise of human emancipation and progress. While thorough immersion in the biblical and Christological tradition may alert one to this unpalatable reality it does not protect one's own deliberations from similar dangerous liaisons. It is only when one has come to the conclusion that what largely distinguishes modernity and postmodernity from previous historical and cultural contexts is that they are almost entirely cultural and ideological constructs that one feels an invigorating liberty to propose new Christological and theological alternatives.

Inevitably in a project of this nature and duration some of the thinking has been aired in other contexts. Chapter five, 'Christology and History', first appeared as 'In the Arms of the Angels: Biblical Interpretation, Christology and the Philosophy of History', in C.G. Bartholomew, C. Greene and K. Möller (eds.), *Renewing Biblical Interpretation* (SAHS Vol. 1; Paternoster/Zondervan, 2000), 198–239. Similarly, an earlier and shortened version of the concluding chapter appeared as 'Starting a Rockslide: Deconstructing History and Language via Christological Detonators', in C. G. Bartholomew, C. Greene and K. Möller (eds.), *After Pentecost: Language & Biblical Interpretation* (SAHS Vol. 2; Paternoster/Zondervan, 2001), 195–223. My only major regret is that

another planned chapter on Christology and the religions had to be omitted due to the projected length of this study.

In undertaking a journey of this nature one is constantly indebted to a range of conversations and insights gained from colleagues and associates. I am grateful to Rev Dr Martin Robinson, Neil Crosbie and Linsi Simmons, and other colleagues (past and present) at the British and Foreign Bible Society, for the encouragement and intellectual stimulation they provided throughout this project. Similarly, I wish to thank Canon Tom Wright, Professor David Ford, Professor Colin Gunton and my close friend Canon Tom Smail who have all helpfully challenged some of my basic assumptions and critically probed some of my conclusions. I am also grateful to Tony Graham, my editor, who has doggedly stuck with me throughout all the twists and turns of the journey. Most of all, I am profoundly grateful to my wife and three children and indeed my wider family who have supported and encouraged me unstintingly throughout this particular venture.



## 1.

# Christology – The Nature of the Task

At the centre of Christianity stands not a timeless truth, nor a principle, not even a cause, but an event and a person – Jesus of Nazareth experienced and confessed as the Christ. Through the diverse genres, titles, confessions of the New Testament there is the constancy of a confession, constituted by the community's present experience of its Crucified and Risen Lord to this person Jesus of Nazareth.<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

Alex Wright asks, what for many of us today, both inside and outside the academy, is an obvious question, why bother with theology?<sup>2</sup> Another question, which has direct bearing on the subject matter of this book, could be added, why bother with Christology, which is, after all, merely a subset of the theological task? Why bother indeed when increasingly the marginalisation of the Christian church, and theological and christological exploration from the wider realities of culture, society and the rampant consumerism of modern life in general is all but complete?

It could be argued that this statement applies only to the fate of the Christian church in Western Europe and some parts of North America, where, according to a recent statement, Christianity has 'almost been vanquished' as a force for spiritual, moral and cultural renewal in the public life of society.<sup>3</sup> Elsewhere, in the Two-Thirds World, the church continues to grow and expand at an astonishing rate. Furthermore it may be that this fact is an expression of the internal dynamic of the Christian faith itself. A faith that is in essence a diaspora

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<sup>1</sup> D. Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism*, 317.

<sup>2</sup> A. Wright, *Why Bother with Theology?*

<sup>3</sup> Remarks made by Cormac Murphy O'Connor, Roman Catholic Archbishop of Westminster, at a National Conference of Priests in Leeds, UK, Sept 2001 that were picked up by the BBC and gained national media coverage. The Archbishop subsequently pointed out that this was not so much an admission of defeat as a clarion call to action and thoughtful missional engagement.

movement, a centrifugal force that always moves away from its heartland and flourishes again on the margins.

In response to this observation two comments should be made. First, the rapid numerical growth of the Christian church, for instance the spread of Pentecostalism in Latin America, is not necessarily synonymous with the emergence of a Christian vision of human flourishing which leads to a renewal of public life and social imagination. Secondly, although we might welcome the growth of Christianity elsewhere in the world this still leaves us with a lacuna in terms of how we understand the decline of the public significance of Christianity in its historic heartlands of Europe and North America. In recent years, attempts have been made to explain this startling decline in terms of a collective case of religious amnesia<sup>4</sup> or a preference for a vicarious form of religious practice<sup>5</sup> or the loss of the discursive power of the Christian story.<sup>6</sup>

Wright adds to this the fact that theology in the West at least, is too far removed from the real world of human relationships, popular culture and the public life of society to be able to offer a counter cultural vision of human life and destiny. This state of affairs, however, was not always the case. Arguably, for at least seventeen hundred years of its existence, Christianity offered to society in general a broader practice of religion that was based largely on a christological vision of reality that assured the Christian faith a central role in the cultural heritage of its native Europe and beyond.

In this book we seek to trace the development of this christological vision, and define and examine its constituent elements. We do so because Christology adumbrates a conviction that there was and is more significance to the man Jesus of Nazareth than just a first-century Palestinian itinerant rabbi, peasant or religious leader who met an untimely death at the hands of the Roman authorities. On the contrary, both the NT and the later creeds of the church claim that Jesus stands in a unique relationship to the God whose coming kingdom he proclaimed, the history of Israel and, indeed, the whole history of humanity, the very existence and destiny of which he is believed to have rescued and redeemed:

The assertion 'Jesus is the Christ' is the basic statement of Christian belief, and Christology is no more than the conscientious elucidation of that proposition. When we say that Jesus is the Christ, we maintain that this unique, irreplaceable Jesus of Nazareth is at one and the same time the Christ sent by God: that is, the Messiah anointed of the Spirit, the salvation of the world, and the eschatological fulfilment of history.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>4</sup> G. Davie, *Religion in Modern Europe: A Memory Mutates*.

<sup>5</sup> G. Davie, *Europe: The Exceptional Case: Parameters of Faith in the Modern World*, 19–20.

<sup>6</sup> C. Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain: Understanding Secularisation 1800–2000*.

<sup>7</sup> W. Kasper, *Jesus the Christ*, 15–16.

It is such theological claims and convictions that Christology sets out to explain and to test, because such momentous statements amount to a particular truth claim that warrants universal significance and relevance.

In the light of this analysis we then offer our own interpretation of why that vision ceased to grasp the public imagination and attention of European and North American society in general. Moving beyond mere diagnosis we offer particular suggestions of how to re-ignite that vision in the context of postmodern deconstructionalism which, like all cultural episodes in human history, is both a threat and an opportunity to the continued credibility of Christian faith and belief to society in general. In our account we combine theological, philosophical, historical, sociological and cultural analysis in recognition of the fact that the Christian faith always receives its distinctive ecclesial existence downstream from broader cultural and historical affiliations and concerns. To begin with, however, we must briefly examine the story (or stories) that underpinned that christological account of how things are in the created order.

### **The Gospel Story – A Pre-critical Look at the Evidence**

Before the advent of historical critical scholarship in the eighteenth century, which largely borrowed its methodology from the natural sciences, scholars, preachers, evangelists and ordinary believers alike viewed the Gospels as history like narratives.<sup>8</sup> A pre-critical reading of the NT attended to the plain literary sense of the Gospels and epistles, and concluded that here was a real story, involving real historical occurrences based on a number of accounts of the life of a real historical person. For Martin Luther and John Calvin, the biblical world and the world of their own experience were one and the same reality.<sup>9</sup> There was little concern about an apparent critical distance or dislocation between the world of the NT and that of seventeenth-century Europe. Indeed, the latter was judged and appraised in the light of the former, because it was the biblical world that attested to the coming of the Saviour into our midst. Consequently, it would have been of no surprise to the reformers that the question of the true significance or identity of Jesus is raised in the Gospel records themselves and not just by the christological controversies that beset the early church in the fourth and fifth centuries.

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<sup>8</sup> H. Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics*.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Neil B. MacDonald, 'Illocutionary Stance in Hans Frei's *The Eclipse of the Biblical Narrative: An Exercise in Conceptual Redescription and Normative Analysis*', in C. Bartholomew, C. Greene & K. Möller (eds), *After Pentecost: Language & Biblical Interpretation*, 312–27.

The uncertainty and curiosity over Jesus' identity originates in the encounter between Jesus and those to whom he speaks and ministers. For instance, John the Baptist's question, 'Are you he who is to come, or shall we look for another?' (Mt. 11:3), expresses the conundrum that Jesus' person and ministry posed to his contemporaries. Was this the promised Messiah or was Jesus merely another itinerant cynic, charismatic rabbi or prophet, or, indeed, as some postulated, was he the agent of Beelzebub, the prince of the devils? The same enigmatic quality occurs during Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem: 'the whole city was stirred and asked, "Who is this?"' (Mt. 21:10). Even Satan seemed unsure of Jesus' identity, hence the repeated interrogation 'if you are the Son of God' before the equally determined attempt to test out Jesus' credentials (Mt. 4:1-11; Lk. 4:1-13).

If the Gospels are not simply the carefully edited credo of the early church, but contain some genuine evidence of the enigma Jesus presented to his contemporaries then part of the difficulty was no doubt due to the fact that he did not seem to fit with previous patterns and expectations of what constituted a messenger of God, a prophet, or teacher of religion. He was not a priest; unlike his cousin John the Baptist, he did not come from a priestly family. Neither was he a bona fide prophet in the OT sense of the word, because his preaching was not couched in the idiom of a reiteration of the word of God. Nor was he simply an apocalyptic seer or visionary whose main concern was to interpret the signs of the times and proclaim God's judgement upon society in general. He was most definitely not a teacher of the law in the Pharisaical sense of the word; indeed, he was opposed to the casuistry that typified their profession.<sup>10</sup> Nor was he merely a teacher of wisdom, although he did speak in parables, aphorisms and proverbs. He was not a politically motivated Zealot,<sup>11</sup> nor was he simply another itinerant magician, wonder worker or charismatic

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<sup>10</sup> One of the factors that distinguishes what is referred to as the third quest for the historical Jesus is a dispute over just how radical and noticeable was Jesus' conflict or controversy with the Pharisees. For instance, M. Borg in *Conflict, Holiness and Politics in the Teachings of Jesus* views Jesus as advocating a new holiness agenda based on a politics of mercy over and against the traditional purity code preferred by the Pharisees. E.P. Sanders, on the other hand, minimises the significance of the supposed conflict between Jesus and the Pharisees because he wants to stress the continuity between Jesus and his contemporary Jewish *Sitz im Leben*. See *Jesus and Judaism* and *The Historical Figure of Jesus*.

<sup>11</sup> The third quest has sought to re-open what were previously regarded as almost standard theories of NT exegesis. J.D. Crossan denies that there was a Zealot movement before or during Jesus' ministry; see *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* and *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography*. M. Hengel and J.K. Riches argue vehemently to the contrary. See *Judaism and Hellenism: Studies in their Encounter in Palestine During the Early Hellenistic Period* and *The World of Jesus: First Century Judaism in Crisis*, respectively.

miracle worker. In all respects, Jesus broke apart previous categories and expectations. As Eduard Schweizer commented, Jesus was ‘the man who fits no one formula’.<sup>12</sup>

To a certain extent this was also the case in terms of his intimate address of God as *Abba*, his message that the future rule of God had already broken through in his own person and ministry, his predictions concerning his own suffering and fate, and his table fellowship with women, the poor and those who were considered to be the social outcasts of contemporary society. There can be no doubt therefore that, ‘the question of Jesus’ identity, role, or relationship to the divine forced itself on those who came in contact with him – either he was a blasphemer, a fool, or one who spoke with divine authority’, indeed,<sup>13</sup> all three possibilities are entertained in the Gospels (Mk. 1:22, 27; 2:7; 3:21).

Such uncertainty and speculation concerning the true identity and status of Jesus reflects ‘the encounter quality of the first christological reflections’<sup>14</sup> (i.e. the issue of Jesus’ identity did not arise first and foremost as a theoretical problem). It was not the problem of how this person can be said to both express and unite the essence of humanity and divinity in a way that is unique or unparalleled in the history of religion. In fact, this is an issue with which the Gospels are not concerned. Rather, it was in the actual, concrete, everyday interaction of Jesus with individuals and the multitudes – his compassion for the poor, the sick and the marginalised members of society; his proclamation of the coming kingdom of God and his demonstration of the saving and healing reality of that kingdom in individual lives – which produced the first examples of christological reflection and confession.

The Gospels affirm both the mysterious and enigmatic quality of Jesus’ life and ministry, as well as an apparent witness to his unique status as the promised Messiah. Peter’s famous confession at Caesarea Philippi is understandably a turning point in the Gospels. Here Jesus raises the question of his own identity in the face of public speculation and uncertainty. The answer he received constitutes ‘the first example of a dogma understood as a public confession’.<sup>15</sup> ‘You are the Christ, the Son of the living God’ (Mt. 16:16). However, this form of confession was not confined to those of the house of Israel or to those who knew Jesus intimately. The centurion who witnessed the terrible and

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<sup>12</sup> E. Schweizer, *Jesus Christ: The Man from Nazareth and the Exalted Lord*, 86.

<sup>13</sup> R.H. Fuller & P. Perkins, *Who Is This Christ?*, 24. Kasper makes the same point: ‘Who was Jesus of Nazareth? On the one hand he is regarded as the messianic bringer of salvation, on the other as a blasphemer and false prophet or as a rebel. Herod derides him as a fool (Lk. 23:6–12) and his closest relatives regard him as mad (Mk. 3:21).’ Kasper, *Jesus*, 68.

<sup>14</sup> D.J. Hall, *Professing The Faith*, 373.

<sup>15</sup> B. Lohse, *A Short History of Christian Doctrine*, 9.

tumultuous events of the crucifixion exclaimed, 'Surely he was the [or a] Son of God!' (Mt. 27:54).

As we have intimated previously, however, the Gospels also tell us that Jesus came under suspicion as either a messianic impostor, a political revolutionary, or a blasphemer because he appeared to put himself above the authority of the Mosaic Law; or indeed a combination of all three because his own subversive re-telling and re-enactment of the central narrative of his native Judaism afforded to him a crucial role as the personal representative of YHWH, i.e. the Messiah.<sup>16</sup> Consequently, it was also the case that, 'he came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him' (Jn. 1:11). The issue of who Jesus was and is still stands at the heart of Jewish-Christian relationships. Much of the anti-Semitism that has bedevilled the history of Christianity stems from the unequivocal testimony of the Gospels that Jesus was rejected by his own people and suffered an ignominious fate. The explanation and interpretation of Jesus' suffering and death later promulgated by the nascent Christian Church reflects those Jewish origins, namely that this was an atonement for the sins of the people.<sup>17</sup> Although nowhere does the NT provide a complete theological explanation of what that atonement actually involves or means.

How much such affirmations reflect the faith of the early Church and how much they can be attributed to the immediate response of Jesus' contemporaries is a central and pressing issue. The one incontrovertible fact that modern scholarship has forced us to accept is that the Gospels do not present us with the biographical account of the life of Jesus. Rather, they introduce us, to a certain extent, to the variegated strands of the credo of the early Church and it is to this issue that we must now turn.

## **The Critics' Story – Searching for the Historical Jesus**

It would not be a gross generalisation to claim that since the eighteenth century the Jesus story has tended to be supplanted and indeed, at times all but obliterated, by the critics' story, particularly as that concern has manifested itself in the seemingly endless search for the so-called 'historical Jesus'. So called because it is this elusive figure, it is contended, that lies behind the different and diverse christological titles we find scattered around the NT. Rarely, therefore, does any scholar nowadays commence christological investigation with a simple lexicographical method that seeks to delineate the implicit meaning of the

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<sup>16</sup> This indeed is the central emphasis of N.T. Wright's fine study, *Jesus And The Victory of God*.

<sup>17</sup> See for instance M. Casey, *From Jewish Prophet to Gentile God: The Origins and Development of New Testament Christology*.

various christological titles. Rather, it is assumed that the christological titles (such as *Logos*, Wisdom, Messiah, Son of God, Son of Man and the new Adam) actually amount to post-resurrection, public professions of faith that tell us as much about the social, cultural and religious context of the early Christian communities as they do about the person of Jesus. The more favoured route, particularly by many now involved in the latest episode of Jesus research, is to draw a firm line between the historical and the theological, and contend that what the NT scholar can legitimately concern him or herself with is the former and not the latter.

N.T. Wright argues for a fourfold classification of the main stages of this movement. The first quest, he asserts, began with Reimarus and ended with Albert Schweitzer; the new quest began with Ernst Käsemann and ended with Eduard Schillebeeckx; the third quest was dominated by E.P. Sanders and Geza Vermes; and the 'renewed new quest', as Wright labels it, is probably best represented by J. Dominic Crossan and the Jesus Seminar.<sup>18</sup> Ben Witherington, on the other hand, opts for a simpler schema, which he refers to as the first, second, and third quests, incorporating Sanders and Vermes into the latter movement.<sup>19</sup> It is Witherington's classification we will adopt as we briefly survey some of the major findings of the third quest for the historical Jesus.

### *Jesus the cynic*

One of the more fashionable trends proffered by representatives of this burgeoning industry of Jesus research is the attempt to equate the original Jesus with other discernible contemporary religious figures or types. Thus we have the notion of Jesus the cynic, a thesis intriguingly ventured by Crossan, Burton Mack and Gerald Downing.<sup>20</sup> Bold and at times overtly historicist and unsubstantiated claims are made that Jesus was one of a variety of the popular philosophers who roamed the Greco-Roman world, offering their own brand of cynical withdrawal from a corrupt and decadent society. The difficulty here is that Jesus' worldview and preaching appear to be permeated with an essentially Jewish eschatological expectation concerning the impending judgement brought about by the proximity of the kingdom of God, a theme which is almost wholly absent from the message of the cynics.

<sup>18</sup> Wright, *Victory*, 13–121; cf. also M. Goodacre, 'The Quest to Digest Jesus: Recent Books on the Historical Jesus', *RRT* 7.2 (April 2000), 156–61.

<sup>19</sup> B. Witherington, *The Jesus Quest: The Third Search for the Jew of Nazareth*.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Crossan, *Historical Jesus*; also B. Mack, *A Myth of Innocence: Mark and Christian Origins*, Cf. also M. Borg, 'A Temperate Case for a Non-eschatological Jesus', in *Foundations and Facts Forum* 2(3): 81–102; *Jesus: A New Vision*; also *An Orthodoxy Reconsidered: The 'End-of-the-World' Jesus*, 207–17; also F.G. Downing, *Cynics and Christian Origins*.

### ***Jesus the Spirit-filled mystic or Spirit-possessed healer***

Outside the rarefied atmosphere of the Jesus Seminar, Marcus Borg, Vermes and Graham Stanton offer a more restrained thesis that in Jesus we find a charismatic prophet with unusual healing gifts.

Borg claims that the Spirit-filled person is a well-known religious type with two distinguishing characteristics. First, frequent and vivid experiences of God of a mystical or visionary nature that correspond to Jesus' acknowledgement of God in intimate terms as *Abba*. Secondly, such a person easily becomes a conduit, or a living embodiment of the Spirit's power, manifested in healings, miracles and exorcisms.<sup>21</sup>

Stephen Davies, although constructed from very different historical premises, offers a similar argument.<sup>22</sup> Building on the earlier work of James Dunn and Geoffrey Lampe,<sup>23</sup> Davies concludes that Jesus was a spirit-possessed charismatic healer and that this is the link between the Jesus of the Gospels and the Christ of the NT communities, i.e. 'Christology grew out of Pneumatology'.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> M Borg, *Conflict, Holiness and Politics in the Teachings of Jesus*.

<sup>22</sup> S. Davies, *Jesus the Healer: Possession, Trance and the Origins of Christianity*.

<sup>23</sup> J.D.G. Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit*; cf. also G.W.H. Lampe, *God as Spirit*.

<sup>24</sup> Davies, *Jesus the Healer*, 187. To a certain extent, all attempts to identify the historical Jesus with other recognisable religious itinerants of the time suffer from similar flaws and weaknesses. At worst they demonstrate a tendency to manipulate, or at best show an unwarranted preference for, certain dubious historical sources. For instance, in the case of Crossan and those involved in the Jesus Seminar, the denigration of Marcan priority in favour of an exaggerated over-reliance on extra-canonical sources such as the Gospels of Peter and James despite the latter's obvious Gnostic influences; and an equally imaginative reconstruction of Q. Cf. Witherington's comments on methodology in *Jesus Quest*, 79, 208. Also problematic is the dissolution of the old eschatological consensus dominant in NT studies since Schweitzer, and the consequent virtual abandonment of any apocalyptic or eschatological context to Jesus' life and ministry, or the translation of eschatology into ethics. Finally, the inability to take seriously or examine rigorously the passion and resurrection traditions. As Witherington comments, 'We do not believe that the Gospel writers were badly mistaken when they concentrated half or more of their Gospels on the last week of Jesus' life; most if not all that Jesus said or did prior to Passover would have been long forgotten had it not been for the events of that week. In Acts, the early Christian preachers focus on the death and resurrection of Jesus and, like Paul, rarely quoted Jesus' parables or aphorisms.' Cf. Witherington, *ibid.*, 92; NT scholarship may well change in this regard as R.E. Brown's *The Death of the Messiah: From Gethsemane to the Grave: A Commentary on the Passion Narratives in the Four Gospels* is fully absorbed and sifted.

### *Jesus the Hasid*

Vermes seeks to reconfigure Jesus as essentially a charismatic Galilean holy man in the tradition of the *hasids*, despite the fact that the Gospels contain little evidence of Jesus as a prayer warrior and an abstemious observer of the law.<sup>25</sup> Vermes has modified his former notions only in so far as Jesus is now seen as a prophet-like holy man and charismatic leader cum exorcist, whose character and charm exceeds by far the normal credentials of the *hasidim*. However, he still holds to the old development thesis that, largely because of the influence of Paul and John, Jesus the holy man was gradually elevated to the status of incarnate Lord.<sup>26</sup>

### *Jesus the Jew: prophet or reformer*

Not surprisingly, there has been a counter trend in the third quest to firmly situate the historical Jesus within a first-century Jewish context. Sanders, whose work has been highly influential in this regard, sought to underscore the link between the historical Jesus and the early Christian communities by portraying Jesus as essentially an eschatological prophet who preached and expected the imminent arrival of the kingdom of God. In Sanders' case, a restoration eschatology, rather than any particular social or political reform, takes centre stage. He argues that Jesus, like the Qumran community, waited for the judgement of God upon a corrupt temple and the restoration of Israel as the covenant people of God which were also discernible concerns of the early church:

Jesus looked for the imminent direct intervention of God in history, the elimination of evil and evildoers, the building of the new and glorious temple, and the reassembly of Israel with himself and his disciples as leading figures in it.<sup>27</sup>

In a rather different vein, Gerd Theissen, Richard A. Horsley and R. David Kaylor<sup>28</sup> have sought to depict Jesus as a radical social prophet initiating a renewal and reform movement within contemporary Galilean Judaism. Concentrating their corporate efforts on exploring and detailing the religious,

<sup>25</sup> G. Vermes, *Jesus the Jew: A Historian's Reading of the Gospels*.

<sup>26</sup> G. Vermes, *The Changing Faces of Jesus*.

<sup>27</sup> Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism*, 153.

<sup>28</sup> G. Theissen, *Sociology of Early Palestinian Christianity* and *The Shadow of the Galilean: The Quest of the Historical Jesus in Narrative Form*; R.A. Horsley, *Sociology and the Jesus Movement*; R.A. Horsley and J.S. Hanson, *Bandits, Prophets and Messiahs: Popular Movements at the Time of Jesus*; R.A. Horsley, *Jesus and the Spiral of Violence: Popular Jewish Resistance in Roman Palestine*; R.D. Kaylor, *Jesus the Prophet: His Vision of the Kingdom on Earth*.

economic and socio-political setting of first-century Galilee and Judea, they draw comparisons between Jesus and his disciples and the Jewish reform movements of the time. Theissen maintains the Schweitzerian consensus that Jesus expected the imminent arrival of the kingdom, whereas Horsley prefers a Jesus with a radical social agenda who sought to challenge the power structures of his native land, particularly patriarchy, and reorder Galilean society along essentially egalitarian lines. Maintaining the egalitarian theme, Kaylor discovers a Jesus who sought to return to pre-monarchical covenant theology based on peace and justice for all.

A purely reformist Jesus and, indeed, even a Jesus with an acute eschatological expectation, does not necessarily maintain a strong connection between Jesus of Nazareth and the later full-blooded christological affirmations of the NT. Indeed, many biblical scholars are still inherently suspicious of any such connections, so it is refreshing to find those who acknowledge the crucially important nature of this question, because to leave it as a mere historical lacuna is to effectively barter away some of the essential capital of early Christianity.

### *Jesus the sage*

In line with these comments it is perhaps more profitable to look at the efforts of those scholars who are unafraid to investigate the 'Christology of Jesus'.<sup>29</sup> Here again we can refer to two recent works, both of which have different emphasis but put Jesus firmly within the hinterland of first-century Jewish expectation.

Ben Witherington and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza view Jesus as essentially a prophetic Jewish sage, 'standing at the confluence of prophetic, apocalyptic and wisdom traditions',<sup>30</sup> and so offering a counter wisdom to the Judaism of his day.<sup>31</sup> Fiorenza prefers a Jesus who is a radical prophetic figure standing in the line of the more egalitarian tradition of Judaism, and so opposed to both the hierarchical and patriarchal structures of contemporary Judaism. In the name of the *Sophia* God, Jesus created a 'discipleship of equals', an essentially reformist movement within Judaism that connected with the equally anti-patriarchal Christian movement of the early church, situated as it was within Greco-Roman structures of domination.<sup>32</sup> In this way Fiorenza endeavours to overturn what she and other feminists concur is a baleful history of 'androcentric' bias in biblical scholarship and so valorise a Jesus who is a

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<sup>29</sup> B. Witherington, *The Christology of Jesus*.

<sup>30</sup> B. Witherington, *Jesus Quest*, 163.

<sup>31</sup> B. Witherington, *Jesus the Sage: The Pilgrimage of Wisdom*.

<sup>32</sup> E.S. Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins*, 99–159.

liberator of women and other marginalised and oppressed groups within his native Judaism.<sup>33</sup>

### ***Jesus: Personified Wisdom***

Witherington goes further than Fiorenza and unearths a very important strand for modern Christology. His investigation of the wisdom tradition found in the Old Testament and other apocryphal sources concludes that wisdom was already personified in this tradition as an attribute of divine agency distinct from God. Relying heavily on the material referred to as Q, Witherington suggests that Jesus understood himself not simply as a prophetic sage, but as the personification of God's wisdom on earth. This helps to explain 'some of the key elements in Jesus' teaching: his emphasis on the kingdom, Son of Man, God as Father, creation theology, the lack of *halakic* material, the absence of any "thus says the Lord" formulas and the stress on justice and the reversal of fortunes'.<sup>34</sup> Similarly, such convictions are taken up in the christological hymns of the epistles (Phil. 2:6–11; Col. 1:15–20; 1 Tim. 3:16; Heb. 1:2b–4), brokering a transition from the sapiential messianology of the teachings of Jesus to the high Christology of the later Christian church.<sup>35</sup>

### ***Jesus the Messiah***

In terms of those who want to develop, what Wright refers to as a pincer movement in NT studies, both moving forward from an analysis of early Judaism and backwards from the Gospels and the witness of the early church, a number of scholars have somewhat surprisingly happened on a Jesus who is only understandable as in some sense a Messianic figure.<sup>36</sup> Here special mention should be made of the meticulous and painstaking scholarship of John P. Meier.<sup>37</sup> He

<sup>33</sup> See chapter 8 for a full discussion of these and similar issues.

<sup>34</sup> Witherington, *Jesus Quest*, 244.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 270.

<sup>36</sup> See for instance, P. Stuhlmacher, *Jesus of Nazareth – Christ of Faith*; J.D.G. Dunn, *Christology in the Making: A New Testament Inquiry into the Origins of the Doctrine of the Incarnation*, and 'Messianic Ideas and Their Influence on the Jesus of History', in J.H. Charlesworth (ed.), *The Messiah: Developments in Earliest Judaism and Christianity*, 365–81; M. Bockmuehl, *This Jesus: Martyr, Lord, Messiah*; I.H. Marshall, *The Origins of New Testament Christology*; P. Pokorny, *The Genesis of Christology: Foundations for a Theology of the New Testament*; M. de Jonge, *Jesus, the Servant-Messiah*; Witherington, *Christology*; Wright, *Victory, and Who Was Jesus?*. This surprising consensus moves us beyond the impasse that dominated the older quests for the historical Jesus.

<sup>37</sup> J.P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*. Vol. 1, *The Roots of the Problem and the Person*. Vol. 2, *Mentor, Message and Miracles*.

demonstrates that even in the postmodern world of hermeneutical pluralism, a scholarly application of the historical critical method to the canonical material can reap surprising dividends.<sup>38</sup> Meier cautiously but deliberately constructs a basic life of Jesus that offers few surprises but establishes Jesus as both a marginal Jew and so a mere blip on the radar screen of the larger Greco-Roman world, yet, nevertheless, a Messianic figure in the line of Moses, Elijah and Elisha:

Whatever his precise relationship to the Elijah of old, Jesus the eschatological prophet was acting out the role of the eschatological Elijah as he both proclaimed the imminent coming of God's rule and made the rule a reality even now by his miracles. It was this convergence and configuration of different traits in the one man Jesus ... that gave Jesus his distinctiveness or "uniqueness" within the Palestinian Judaism in the early first century AD.<sup>39</sup>

Meier creatively explores the similarities and the differences between the respective persons and ministries of John the Baptist and Jesus concluding that Jesus was initially a disciple of John. Consequently, it would be highly unlikely if Jesus abandoned or radically altered the eschatological tone of John's message.

One of the most helpful aspects of Meier's work is his rigorous and detailed examination of Jesus teaching concerning the kingdom of God. It is helpful and judicious because it demonstrates just what historical critical scholarship can and cannot establish. He concludes that kingdom of God, an expression that was sparsely used in early Jewish literature, formed the centre of Jesus' teaching and was not a metaphor for socio-political reform. Instead, it refers to the coming of God in person to reverse the tide of injustice, suffering and poverty in favour of God's just and inclusive reign and rule. Less helpful is Meier's tendency to return to the old Jesus of history/Christ of faith distinction that once again drives a wedge between history and theology, and creates a bifurcation that, as we shall see, leaves Christology outflanked as far as its biblical basis is concerned.

Even though Meier and other scholars quite rightly want to take seriously the fact that Jesus was crucified under the epithet 'King of the Jews', it is as well to keep in mind James H. Charlesworth's comment that we should distinguish Christology (the affirmation that Jesus was the Christ, the anointed viceroy of God) from messianology (the disparate notions concerning various messianic figures we find in post-exilic Jewish literature).<sup>40</sup> We will leave a

<sup>38</sup> The same could be said of N.T. Wright as he seeks to deploy his particular brand of critical realism in regard to historical scholarship.

<sup>39</sup> Meier, *Marginal Jew*, 1045; quoted in Witherington, *Jesus Quest*, 205.

<sup>40</sup> J.H. Charlesworth, 'From Messianology to Christology: Problems and Prospects', in J.H. Charlesworth (ed.), *The Messiah: Developments in Earliest Judaism and*

fuller discussion of these and other related issues to our penultimate chapter, however, it is sufficient to say at this stage that the consensus of scholarship appears to be that there was no single coherent or normative Messiah figure that most Jews were expecting at the time of Jesus.<sup>41</sup> Similarly, the phrase ‘the Messiah’ rarely occurs in the Old Testament and only very rarely in early Jewish literature generally, so not surprisingly the origins of messianology are extremely fluid, going back to the Son of Man figure we find in Daniel 7:13–14 and 1 Enoch, as well as the expectations of another king in the Davidic lineage.

### *Jesus the eschatological prophet*

In a rather different but equally important vein, Wright claims that both the symbolic import and practical impact of Jesus’ ministry was directed at changing Israel’s whole worldview. Narrativial worldviews – represented by Jesus, the Qumran community, the Pharisees, the Zealots and the Sadducees – revolved around certain central questions and typical responses, although they all differed in how to effect the necessary change. Wright outlines the range of questions concerned:

1. *Who are we?* – the normal and almost universal answer was, ‘We are Israel, the chosen people of the Creator God.’
2. *Where are we?* – ‘We are in the Holy Land focused on the Temple, but, paradoxically, we are in a sense in exile.’
3. *What is wrong?* – ‘We have the wrong rulers; pagans on the one hand, compromised Jews on the other, or halfway between Herod and his family. We are all involved in a less-than-ideal situation.’
4. *What is the solution?* – ‘Our God must act again to give us the true sort of rule, that is, his own kingship exercised through properly appointed officials (a true priesthood; possibly a king) and in the meantime Israel must be faithful to his covenant charter.’<sup>42</sup>

Consequently, it was not for nothing that Jesus was likened to Elijah, John the Baptist and Jeremiah, because the Gospels provide a profile of Jesus as essentially a prophet whose message and praxis intertwined in ‘a new way the prophetic styles of oracular prophets on the one hand and leaders of renewal movements

<sup>40</sup> (continued) *Christianity*, 3–35. Although it is interesting that N.T. Wright takes issue with Charlesworth on this point, cf. *Victory*, 486.

<sup>41</sup> See for instance, J. Neusner, W.S. Green and E. Frerichs (eds), *Judaisms and their Messiahs at the Turn of the Christian Era*.

<sup>42</sup> Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, 243; cf. also Witherington, *Jesus Quest*, 221.

on the other'.<sup>43</sup> Wright discerns four interrelated themes in Jesus' message and revolutionary praxis:

1. His invitation to Israel to embrace eschatological repentance and faith at the expense of Zealot revolutionary zeal and insurrection.
2. The unconditional message of forgiveness expressed in the welcome of sinners to table fellowship that symbolically expressed the return from exile predicted by the prophets.
3. The challenge to live as the new covenant people of God with a particular lifestyle epitomised in the Jubilee principle.
4. His redefinition of Messiahship according to his kingdom praxis.

Jesus' journey to Jerusalem, climaxing in his actions in the Temple and the upper room, and undertaken in full recognition of the likely consequences, was intended to function like Ezekiel lying on his side or Jeremiah smashing his pot. The prophet's action *embodied* the reality. Jesus went to Jerusalem in order to embody the third and last element of the coming of the kingdom. He was not content to *announce* that YHWH was returning to Zion. He intended to enact, symbolise and personify that climatic event.<sup>44</sup>

In a manner reminiscent of Schweitzer, Wright claims Jesus went to Jerusalem intending to force the issue. He sought to take upon himself the testing that preceded the coming of the kingdom of God, defeat the Satan by letting it rent its fury on him, and allow YHWH to act redemptively through him. Not everyone would agree with Wright's interpretation of the eschatological dimensions of Jesus' message and ministry. Similarly, there is a hint that Wright prefers the Lucan Jesus. Some would also quarrel with his basic thesis that Jesus personified and symbolised in his teaching and actions the long-awaited return of YHWH to Zion. However, enough has been said to indicate that located here could be fruitful foundations for a full-blown Christology.

What this brief review of some of the main strands of recent Jesus research demonstrates is that however the move is made from the historical to the theological, they cannot and should not be separated in the name of so-called objective historical research.<sup>45</sup> The NT eschews any such distinction between the historical and the theological because both are inextricably intertwined and form what we might refer to as the basic ecology of salvation.<sup>46</sup> Jesus only becomes accessible to us not when we try and detach him from the witness

<sup>43</sup> Wright, *Victory*, 169.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 615.

<sup>45</sup> Such apparent objectivity is now seriously questioned. Cf. I. Provan, *Ideologies, Literary and Critical: Reflections on Recent Writings on the History of Israel*, 585–606.

<sup>46</sup> In this regard see Wright, *Victory*, 8–9.

of the early church – which, as we shall see, is what much modern critical scholarship from Reimarus to Adolf von Harnack and Johannes Weiss; and now of course, the Jesus Seminar, has endeavoured to do – but when we apprehend him through this particular context. The light that shines forth from Jesus, as it is refracted through this particular lens, offers a more multi-dimensional image than the often rather bland stereotypes that emerge from historical-critical reconstruction of the original Jesus.<sup>47</sup>

In conclusion, everything that has been said so far alerts us to a basic affirmation that the Jesus of the Gospels can only be understood in terms of his own religious, historical and cultural context, and that of the early Church. Jesus was a Jew and those who first sought to understand and interpret his significance did so within the context of Jewish spirituality, imbued as it was with apocalyptic and eschatological expectations. It seems clear, for instance, that the infancy narratives reflect something of the ‘*anawin* piety’ – the piety of the poor – which the Judaism of that time espoused and which expressed a belief that God would intervene for the sake of the poor and oppressed. In a similar vein, the story of the disciples meeting the risen Jesus on the Emmaus road and the confession of Peter at Caesarea Philippi appear to reflect the yearnings for political liberation and justice that typified the Zealot cause. As we shall see, despite the disputes and refutations of NT scholars, the enduring significance of Jesus is that both these traditions can be nurtured and transformed into contemporary christological hopes and expectations.

The early church was soon propelled beyond these particular cultural boundaries into a confrontation with the Greek and Roman worlds. In many ways one of the earliest christological slogans, *Jesu Christos Kyrios* (Jesus Christ is Lord; 1 Cor. 12:3; 8:6) reflects the dual allegiance to Jewish and Greek thought which was to prove so decisive to the missionary success of the first Christians.

## **The Biblical Story – Discerning the Logic of the Christological Narrative**

It is entirely appropriate for New Testament scholars, such as James Dunn and Frank Matera,<sup>48</sup> for instance, to distance themselves from a purely historical analysis of the Gospel traditions, preferring instead a more canonical approach that underscores the pluralism of christologies present in the New Testament (e.g. the Son of God christologies of Matthew, Luke, Acts and the Pauline corpus; the Son of Man and last Adam christologies of Mark and Paul; and the

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<sup>47</sup> So for instance G. Bornkamm, *Jesus of Nazareth*.

<sup>48</sup> Dunn, *Christology*, and F.J. Matera, *New Testament Christology*. See also R.W. Wall and E.E. Lemcio, *The New Testament as Canon: A Reader in Canonical Criticism*.

Wisdom/*Logos* christologies of Hebrews, John and Revelation). The central issue all such christologies raise is Jesus' relationship to the God whose kingdom he proclaimed. Underlying the pluralism of the New Testament witness to Jesus is the unitary conviction that Jesus stands in a unique relationship to the future God of the kingdom:

To be sure, the several writings of the New Testament do not present Jesus' relationship to God in the same way, even though most of them identify him as the Son of God. For example, if we only possessed the Synoptic Gospels, it would be difficult to argue that Jesus is the preexistent Son of God. But if we only possessed the Fourth Gospel, we might seriously question Jesus' humanity. Or, if we only possessed the Pauline writings, we would hardly appreciate the earthly life and ministry of Jesus. The genius of the New Testament canon is its ability to hold the diversity and unity of the New Testament in a creative tension that requires each generation to correct and deepen its understanding of Christ.<sup>49</sup>

Is it possible to discern the logic of the christological narrative as it develops in the NT witness to Jesus as the eschatological prophet to Jesus the incarnate Son of God? This was the substance of the thesis advanced some years ago by John Knox.<sup>50</sup>

Knox focused on the question of how the early Church sought to affirm both the humanity and the divinity of Christ as complementary aspects of Jesus' destiny and calling. In so doing, he isolated three distinct yet inter-related patterns of christological reflection that are an essential part of the NT witness to Jesus as the Christ of God.

The first pattern he regarded as the most primitive; it is best described as an adoptionist Christology that takes as its primary reference point the incontrovertible reality of the resurrection. In Acts 2:6, for instance, we read, 'God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Messiah'. Here the inference seems clear: God exalted the Jesus who was crucified – God's holy servant, an extraordinary human being but nothing more – to a new position of power and messianic status. Such a basically adoptionist form of the Christ story was soon recognised as inadequate. While it may have concurred with the actual experience of Jesus' disciples, who knew and remembered him in the flesh, it did not accord with the recognition, contained already in this passage from Acts, that what happened to Jesus was part of God's divine foreknowledge and plan, and not some unfortunate mistake. This raised the question of Jesus' pre-existence:

It would have followed ineluctably upon the primitive Church's acknowledgement of Jesus as the Christ that God should have known him as such before the

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<sup>49</sup> Matera, *Christology*, 255.

<sup>50</sup> J. Knox, *The Humanity and Divinity of Christ*.

foundation of the world. But there is obviously only a short step from the idea of this kind of pre-existence in the mind of God to the conception of a pre-existing hypostasis, a pre-existent being more personal and objective.<sup>51</sup>

Here Knox raises a point that Wolfhart Pannenberg has also emphasised: reflection on the resurrection and post-resurrection status of Christ led almost imperceptibly to an affirmation of the pre-existence of Jesus as the one ordained before the foundation of the world to fulfil the saving purposes of God.

Such retrospective considerations produced the second stage of christological reflection, which is found particularly in the Pauline corpus. Knox referred to this as a *kenosis* (self-emptying) Christology, citing Philippians 2 as his example. The human Jesus is understood to be the result of the self-emptying of a previously divine figure. Knox discerned both of these stages in some of the earliest NT traditions concerning the status of the man Jesus. They were subsequently incorporated into a larger perspective, which Knox labelled incarnationism.

*Kenosis* Christology raised a problem that soon began to dominate the christological concerns of the early church. How could a previously divine figure actually become a real human person? One answer was docetism, which Knox believed was implicit in the high Christology of John's Gospel. Jesus' humanity was a disguise or a mere appearance of the real thing; he was a divine person masquerading in human form. Docetism was deemed inadequate by the early church because, to use the formula first adopted by Gregory of Nazianzus, 'that which he did not assume he did not redeem'. Our salvation is only secure if the humanity of Jesus was the same as our own in all respects, except that it was not polluted by sin and egotism.

Knox claimed that incarnationism (found in various forms in John's Gospel, the Pauline corpus and Hebrews) was a more diverse and variegated form of the Christ story. He concluded, however, that asserting the notion of Christ's pre-existence put an intolerable strain upon the affirmation of the full humanity of Jesus. Consequently, Knox retreated into a functional Christology that simply concentrated on the activity of God in Christ and avoided the apparently intractable issues that he believed incarnationism bequeathed to the later church. He was, however, able to point, albeit inadequately, to a genuine christological logic that forms an essential part of the NT witness that towards the end of the first century, the person Jesus of Nazareth was, in fact, identified with the pre-existent *Logos* of God.

Pannenberg's answer to the christological issue moves in a similar direction.<sup>52</sup> While he agrees that Christology must begin with the history of Jesus, he

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>52</sup> W. Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 2, 282–8.

believes that its primary task, as Knox sought to demonstrate, is to discern the logic or narrative of christological development that is presents in the NT. Adopting a more nuanced approach to Knox, Pannenberg explains that this can only be done on the supposition that there is a complementary relationship between the gospel *of* Jesus and the gospel *about* Jesus. In other words, as we shall see in due course, what the originators of the new or second quest for the historical Jesus set out to demonstrate – namely, that there is an inner consistency between the proclamation of Jesus and the primitive Christian confession that Jesus is the *Christos* and *Kyrios*, – is implicit in the NT itself:

We can develop such a theory only if we assume that the christological confessional statements of primitive Christianity may be understood as an explication of the content and meaning implicit in the appearance and history of Jesus.<sup>53</sup>

Crucial to this correspondence between Jesus' message and the *kerygma* of the early church was the historical event of the resurrection, an event to which all the NT writings give prominence.<sup>54</sup>

Only by his resurrection from the dead did the Crucified attain to the dignity of the *Kyrios* (Phil. 2:9–11). Only thus was he appointed the Son of God in power (Rom. 1:4). Only in the light of the resurrection is he the pre-existent Son. Only as the risen Lord is he always the living Lord of his community.<sup>55</sup>

It is the resurrection that establishes the reality of the divine action of God in the person of Jesus; it affirms the unity of the person of Jesus with the God whose kingdom he proclaimed and inaugurated; it identifies Jesus with God's eschatological saving will and purpose for the whole cosmos; it makes it possible for Christology to move from below to above and affirm that he who is now one with God was always so. For Pannenberg, the resurrection also makes it possible to demonstrate that both Christology from above and below tend to dissolve into one another because both imply the other.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid, 283.

<sup>54</sup> Dunn, *Christology*, 254.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Christology from above begins with the pre-existent divine Son and his relationship to God; it ascertains the basis of the Son's relationship to creation and his incarnation in terms of this primary relationship. In the second century, *Logos* Christology emerged as a way of describing how God both created the world and redeemed it through the same agency. This inevitably entailed that the history of the man Jesus was understood in terms of the earthly realisation of the mission of the divine *Logos* or pre-existent Son. The main criticism of the 'from above' approach to Christology is that it assumes what Christology must substantiate, i.e. the divinity of Jesus. It also

The centrality of the resurrection to christological theory has often been overlooked in the past, but both Jürgen Moltmann and Pannenberg have put it firmly at the centre of their respective christologies. This is an interesting similarity given their divergent approaches to the christological question. It would seem that any Christology worthy of the name must look to the resurrection as the crucial event in Jesus' career because it facilitates the link between Jesus the prophet of the kingdom to Jesus the mediator of the kingdom and Lord of all.<sup>57</sup>

### **The Church's Story – The Continuity of the Incarnational Narrative**

In a recent book that has been largely ignored by the world of biblical scholarship, C. Stephen Evans argues for the historical veracity and philosophical cogency of the church's story:

[It] is an account of how the divine Word took on human flesh was born as a baby, lived a life characterized by miraculous healing and authoritative teaching, died a cruel and voluntary death for the sake of redeeming sinful humans, was raised by God to life, and now abides with God, awaiting the time of his glorious return and ultimate triumph. So much at least seems common ground among orthodox Christians, be they Catholic, Orthodox, or Protestant.<sup>58</sup>

In seeking to debunk the epistemological distinction between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith, Evans directs our attention to a crucial issue: is our only access to Jesus via historical-critical research? History separates us from

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<sup>56</sup> (*continued*) tends to overlook the historical particularity of the man Jesus, his relationship to the God whose kingdom he proclaimed and his setting within the Judaism of his time.

The phrase Christology 'from below to above' was first coined by Albrecht Ritschl in the nineteenth century. He developed this approach in opposition to the speculative Christology of G.W.F. Hegel and F.W.J. Schelling. Ritschl put the historical Jesus at the centre of christological concerns. The problem emerges, however, which aspect of Jesus' life and ministry do we take as the basis of such christological statements? Jesus' self-understanding in relation to the kingdom of God (Ritschl); the preached *kerygma* about Jesus (R. Bultmann, for whom interest in the historical Jesus was of no real theological value), Jesus' authority in relation to the past traditions of Israel (P. Althaus), or both Jesus' proclamation and his praxis of the coming kingdom of God (E. Schillebeeckx)?

<sup>57</sup> Dunn, *Christology*, 267.

<sup>58</sup> C.S. Evans, *The Historical Christ and the Jesus of Faith: The Incarnational Narrative as History*, 5.

those who knew him 'after the flesh', so how do we encounter Jesus today? What role should we allow to the church as both custodian and mediator to successive generations of the basic incarnational narrative concerning the coming of the Son of God in human flesh?

These issues lie at the heart of christological concerns and they help us to distinguish two quite distinctive approaches to Christology: one concentrates on the experience of the present and the other relies on the testimony of the past. One of the earliest christological confessions, 'Jesus Christ our Lord' articulates this distinction because it 'designates, not primarily an historical individual in the past, nor yet a character in a symbolic story, but a present reality actually experienced within the common life'.<sup>59</sup> Moltmann describes these two approaches to the issue as the difference between 'therapeutic Christology' and 'apologetic Christology'<sup>60</sup> (because of the pejorative connotations often associated with the word apologetic, we prefer the term theoretical Christology). Clearly, both approaches are not mutually exclusive, but they do reflect a difference in emphasis that is still crucial to how christological enquiry is conducted and approached.

### ***Therapeutic Christology***

By deciding to opt for a therapeutic or practical Christology, Moltmann stands in the tradition of those who claim that we come to acknowledge the divinity of Jesus through the reality of the salvation he alone can offer. Phillip Melancthon astutely summarised this position when he claimed, 'We only know Christ through his benefits' (*Christum cognoscere, eius beneficia cognoscere*).<sup>61</sup> Moltmann puts it in his own inimical fashion: 'Therapeutic Christology is soteriological Christology. It confronts the misery of the present with the salvation Christ brings, presenting it as a salvation that heals.'<sup>62</sup> This statement is based on two fundamental presuppositions. First, the person and the work of Christ, or Christology and soteriology, cannot be separated either theoretically or practically. The question whether or not Christology must precede soteriology, which is the arrangement we will follow, is a real one. In other words, must we first establish a credible basis to acknowledge and assert the divinity of the Saviour, before the offer of salvation can become one that is universally applicable to the human condition? While this may be theoretically

<sup>59</sup> Knox, *Humanity and Divinity*, 3. To a certain extent, the NT expressions 'according to the flesh' (*kata sarxa*) and 'according to the Spirit' (*kata pneuma*) (cf. 1 Tim. 3:16; 1 Pet. 3:18) express the same distinction.

<sup>60</sup> J. Moltmann, *The Way of Jesus Christ: Christology in Messianic Dimensions*, 44.

<sup>61</sup> Melancthon, *Loci Communes Theologici*, 7.

<sup>62</sup> Moltmann, *Way*, 44.

the case, the point that Moltmann makes is that the person of Christ and the salvation he proclaims is only meaningful if it addresses the concrete wretchedness and situatedness of people in today's world. This constitutes, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer recognised, the *pro me* or *pro nobis* (for us) structure of christological confession. It could well be the case that we only know Jesus as Lord and Saviour because the reality of his saving grace and love actually changes concrete situations in human life and community. 'A Christology which does not put at the beginning of the statement, 'God is only God *pro me*, Christ is only Christ *pro me*, condemns itself'.<sup>63</sup> Secondly, this does not mean we can restrict the salvation and liberation Christ offers to the religious sphere. We cannot claim that we only know Jesus as the Christ through the individual awareness of the forgiveness of sins, or through participation in the eucharistic life and witness of the church, where the real presence of Christ is still to be experienced.

While this is obviously true in terms of our Christian experience and heritage, we cannot restrict christological reflection to the domain of the individual Christian or the church. For Moltmann, this is to condone the corruption of religion that has taken place as a product of the Enlightenment:

In a society which has declared 'religion' to be 'a private affair', the salvation Christ offers can be presented as the private salvation of the individual soul if, and only if, Christianity assents to this confining of the religious question to 'the human heart', emancipated from social ties. But then the economic, social and political sins of human beings which have led to this personal isolation and spiritual loneliness are left without liberating criticism and without the saving hope of the gospel.<sup>64</sup>

The kind of Christology that Moltmann seeks to espouse<sup>65</sup> has laudable antecedents in the Eastern and Western traditions of Christian thought and practice. It is to claim that we know Jesus primarily not through our own religious experience or through membership of the Church, important as both these may well be, but through a life which is conformed to his search for righteousness and infused with his love and compassion for his fellow human beings ('christopraxis'). We only really know the Messiah when we are committed to, and immersed in, his Messianic mission to the world. This entails that we recognise that Christology is eschatologically determined. The mission of the Messiah to reconcile, restore and redeem is still underway. There is an inevitable eschatological proviso to all our Christology. No christological confession can finally grasp the full significance of Jesus because

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<sup>63</sup> D. Bonhoeffer, *Lectures on Christology*, 48.

<sup>64</sup> Moltmann, *Way*, 54.

<sup>65</sup> See chapter 11 for a fuller discussion of Moltmann's Christology.

his own history of engagement with the world is not yet finished. He is, as the title of Moltmann's book implies, still 'on the way' toward the full realisation of his reign in the affairs of the world. Not surprisingly, this also implies that every Christology is contextualised. We join him on the way in the context of one particular episode of history and we seek to interpret him to our contemporaries as the one who still heals our diseases and infirmities.

The question of how Jesus as Lord and Saviour relates to our human predicaments and dilemmas both personal and social has, as we shall see, been interpreted differently in the history of christological debate and also appears in different cultural guises. Nevertheless, theologians as diverse as Friedrich Schleiermacher, Rudolf Bultmann, Paul Tillich and Schillebeeckx all viewed the concrete experience of salvation – the saving grace which brings a new wholeness, meaning and integrity to human existence – as the way in which the unique status of Christ as both the divine Son and the new Adam could be affirmed and acknowledged.

### ***Theoretical Christology***

Theoretical Christology seeks to provide an adequate *apologia*, or intellectual foundation, to the belief in Jesus as the divine Son of God and Saviour of the world. Those who take this particular route would claim that we cannot do this task properly by appealing to, or basing our defence of Christology on, our present experience of salvation, however it is understood. While many who are committed to christopraxis might not want to go as far as Tillich and assert that 'Christology is a function of soteriology', therapeutic Christology, it is claimed, always runs the risk of degenerating into wish-fulfilment. Is there any guarantee that we have not projected onto the historical figure of Jesus human desires for liberation and meaning, which, as we have already acknowledged, inevitably take different cultural shape and form?

This is the substance of Pannenberg's critique of all forms of Christology that take as their starting point some aspect of the soteriological concern.<sup>66</sup> Pannenberg claims that to safeguard against such a possibility of projection, we must locate the saving significance of Jesus in the biblical and doctrinal record to him as the one who reconciles and redeems. While our sympathies will remain with Pannenberg in terms of the two divergent approaches to Christology, it is sufficient to note at this point that it is the continuity of the incarnational narrative that unites both approaches, because the church embodies this story and offers it to the world as the eternal word of life.

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<sup>66</sup> W. Pannenberg, *Jesus—God and Man*, 39–49.

## The Cultural Story – Discerning Another Important Lens of Interpretation

In a fascinating and illuminating study, Jaroslav Pelikan develops a number of distinctive and evocative images or cameos portraying Jesus' place in the history of human culture.<sup>67</sup> He discusses the correspondences and analogies that one finds between the figure of Jesus and the domain of high culture. We will draw upon his considerable insights in a number of ways. At this stage, however, it is important to note how Pelikan demonstrates that each age constructs an image of Jesus out of the cultural hopes, aspirations, biblical and doctrinal interfaces that both make Jesus accessible and simultaneously illustrate something of the genius of the particular age in question. This is because 'For each age, the life and teachings of Jesus represented an answer (or, more often, *the* answer) to the most fundamental questions of human existence and of human destiny'.<sup>68</sup> Tillich articulated a similar point when he contended that every age embodies in cultural and religious form the many ways in which human beings express 'a state of being grasped by an ultimate concern, a concern which qualifies all other concerns as preliminary, and which itself contains the answer to the problem of the meaning of life'.<sup>69</sup>

### *Common culture*

The study and investigation of human culture is a relatively recent arrival on the intellectual scene. It emerged as a major feature of German Romanticism and came to be understood as: 'a shared spiritual force that is manifest in all the customs, beliefs and practices of a people. Culture, they held, shapes language, art, religion and history, and leaves its stamp on the smallest event.'<sup>70</sup>

Similar approaches and definitional stances can be seen in more recent studies concerning the relationship between religious faith and culture. So, for instance, Aidan Nichols comments:

A culture is ... a system of inherited conceptions (intellectual), a set of common standards of behaviour (morals), a pattern of meanings embodied in symbols (material), and a series of conventions governing human interaction (institutional), by which human beings communicate and perpetuate, but also modify and develop, their knowledge about attitudes to life.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> J. Pelikan, *Jesus through the Centuries: His Place in the History of Culture*.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid, 2.

<sup>69</sup> P. Tillich, *Christianity and the Encounter of the World Religions*, 4.

<sup>70</sup> R. Scruton, *An Intelligent Person's Guide to Modern Culture*, 1.

<sup>71</sup> A. Nichols, *Christendom Awake*.

This notion of common culture was later taken over by anthropologists in the their investigation of different tribes and societies.<sup>72</sup>

### ***High culture***

The Romantics unearthed an alternative viewpoint. For many, culture referred to what we would term high culture, the primary forms of which are art, music and literature. On the other hand, Immanuel Kant's threefold distinction of transcendentals into truth, goodness and beauty corresponded epistemologically to science, ethics and art. Utilising this concept, Matthew Arnold defined culture as 'the pursuit of perfection', which required 'an inward condition of the mind and spirit'.<sup>73</sup> Even to this day, high culture is often understood as the domain of the elite, those who involve themselves in the pursuit of intellectual and aesthetic attainment. As we shall see, since the Enlightenment theology has often been confined to this rarefied domain.

### ***Popular culture***

In modern times, particularly with the advent of the human sciences, culture has come to refer mainly to that which we designate as popular culture. For the contemporary sociologist, or exponent of cultural studies, popular culture often provides a mass marketed strategic and fluid identity – a sense of belonging if you wish – for the great mass of ordinary people often in the face of oppression or social exclusion. In the mind of the exponent of popular culture any artefact, system of values, political ideology or media-induced reality are all the simulacra of particular cultural aspirations and beliefs which are there to be deconstructed and analysed at will.

It is Roger Scruton's fascinating contention that all three forms of culture find their unity and common basis in religion. This is similar in some ways to Tillich's understanding. Common culture, expressed and articulated in a common language, values and beliefs, adheres in common religion. The social, moral and political function of all religion is to offer and sustain an ethical view of human life and destiny:

The ethical vision endows human matter with a personal form, and therefore lifts us above nature, to set us side by side with our judge. If we are judged then we must be free, and answerable for our actions. The free being is not just an organism: he has a life of his own, which is uniquely his and which he creates through his choices. Hence he stands above nature in the very activities which reveal him to be a part of it.

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<sup>72</sup> Cf. K. Tanner, *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda For Theology*, 25–38.

<sup>73</sup> Cf. M.P. Gallagher, *Clashing Symbols: An Introduction to Faith & Culture*, 11.

He is not a creature of the moment, but on the contrary a creature extended through time and compromised forever by his actions. You are answerable now for the deeds of yesterday and accountable tomorrow for the deeds of today.<sup>74</sup>

Pelikan also acknowledges that Christology continually informs and sanctions such an ethical vision of human nature and destiny, even though that ethical vision will take different cultural forms. The difficulty with Scruton's conclusions is that they come perilously close to that reduction of religion to ethics and morality which has been characteristic of all those theologians who deduce their philosophical presuppositions from Kant. Scruton's eventual conclusion that the only way to rescue the ethical vision from extinction in a postmodern world is to live against the grain in Confucian like Stoicism and restraint would bear this out.

### *Christ and culture*

Perhaps the classical study in the modern period of the relationship between Christianity and culture was Niebuhr's *Christ and Culture*. Niebuhr defined culture as the,

'artificial, secondary environment' which man superimposes on the natural. It comprises language, habits, ideas, beliefs, customs, social organisation, inherited artefacts, technical processes and values. This 'social heritage', this 'sui generis', which the New Testament writers frequently had in mind when they spoke of 'the world', which is represented in many forms but to which Christians like other men are inevitably subject, is what we mean when we speak of culture.<sup>75</sup>

Niebuhr's synopsis is but another attempt to define common culture. He understands the essential significance of culture as the attempt to develop, nurture and sustain human values.<sup>76</sup> Consequently, culture relates to 'the conservation of values', although Niebuhr did recognise that such values were relative to different cultural forms and hence were inevitably disparate, pluriform and at times mutually contradictory.<sup>77</sup> The difficulty here is that the reduction of the culture issue to the problem of competing values effectively surrenders a christological approach to culture to that of ethics.

Niebuhr is remembered more for the typology he articulates in terms of how the relationship between Christ and culture can be expressed – namely, Christ against culture, the Christ of culture, Christ above culture, Christ

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<sup>74</sup> Scruton, *Guide*, 11.

<sup>75</sup> H.R. Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 46.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

and culture in paradox, and Christ the transformer of culture.<sup>78</sup> However, Niebuhr's typology has a tendency to pit Christ and culture over and against each other as 'two complex realities', whereas we wish to argue for the inevitable interaction and interdependence of both realities within a more comprehensive hermeneutical and intellectual framework.<sup>79</sup>

The emphases and importance we allow for successive cultural contexts aligns our analysis with George Lindbeck's cultural-linguistic model of doctrinal and religious formulation:

A religion can be viewed as a kind of cultural and /or linguistic framework or medium that shapes the entirety of life and thought ... It is not primarily an array of beliefs about the true and the good (although it may involve these), or a symbolism expressive of basic attitudes, feelings or sentiments (though these will be generated). Rather, it is similar to an idiom that makes possible the description of realities, the formulation of beliefs, and the experiencing of inner attitudes, feelings and sentiments. Like a culture or language, it is a communal phenomenon that shapes the subjectivities of individuals rather than being primarily a manifestation of those subjectivities.<sup>80</sup>

While we would agree with Lindbeck's emphasis on the cultural embeddedness of doctrinal discourse and language, we would not agree that christological statements or beliefs are reducible to this context alone. There is always the question of how such christological language was acquired or

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<sup>78</sup> Niebuhr's classification has rightly been applauded for its comprehensiveness and scope, nevertheless, it is our contention that the problem with this analysis, at least as far as Western culture is concerned, is that historically there have really only been three mainstream manifestations of the relationship between Christ and culture: (1) the apostolic model, which approximates to Niebuhr's Christ against culture; (2) the Christendom model, which obviously moves close to Niebuhr's second type, i.e. the identification of Christ and culture; (3) the pluralist model, which is unfortunately the capitulation of Christ to culture. Niebuhr is aware of this capitulation, but he handles it with notable equivocation when he assesses Ritschl; *ibid.*, 100–22. We would also argue for a new model – the critical interaction of Christ and culture; this is similar to, but critical of, Niebuhr's Christ the transformer of culture type. This new model includes the postmodern experience of fragmentation and multiculturalism, which Niebuhr's study could not address. Cf. C.J.D. Greene, 'Consumerism and the Spirit of the Age', in C. Bartholomew & T. Moritz (eds), *Christ and Consumerism*, 13–33.

<sup>79</sup> Cf. C. Schwobel, 'Once Again, Christ and Culture: Remarks on the Christological Bases of a Theology of Culture', in C. Gunton (ed.), *Trinity, Time, And Church: A Response to the Theology of Robert W. Jenson*, 103–26.

<sup>80</sup> G.A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Post-Liberal Age*, 33. See also A.E. McGrath, *The Genesis of Doctrine: A Study in the Foundation of Doctrinal Criticism*.

learned. In that sense, the ‘grammar of assent’, to use Cardinal Newman’s phrase, is a more polymorphous form of discourse than Lindbeck’s analysis allows: ‘Theology forever remains a fallible, unfinished, and constructive task and not simply the reassertion of a single cultural-linguistic system’.<sup>81</sup> In other words, there is always the reality of that conversation or mutual interaction of the Jesus story, the critics’ story, the biblical story, the church’s story and the cultural story that continually witnesses to the enduring power of this particular religious narrative. We might wish to assent to the epistemological priority of the biblical witness to the risen Jesus, but it is often the cultural story that is allowed to predominate, and this raises another concern.

### ***The perennial problem: cultural accommodation or isolation?***

A full-blown theology of culture is an exercise yet to be successfully explicated in Christian theology and we will not be attempting this enormous task here.<sup>82</sup> However, we will be addressing that crucial issue by observing and, at times, radically disagreeing with how successive theologians tackle this question, especially if they do so from a normative christological perspective. At this juncture, however, we can say that Lindbeck’s analysis alerts us to that pressing and at times vexing dilemma we will encounter constantly in our explorations: the attempt to tread a fine line between cultural accommodation and cultural insensitivity. There can never be any guarantee of success in this endeavour; it is always something of a delicate balancing act.<sup>83</sup> It may come as a surprise to those who invoke the standard interpretation of the theological orientation of Karl Barth, but he stood in the same tradition when he contended that the changing contours of our historical and cultural contexts demanded that theological reflection continually begin afresh.

It is our conviction that we are presently immersed in a vast cultural transition. This study represents an attempt to seek to learn from the successes and the failures of the past, so as to equip us for the inevitable pilgrimage of theological reconstruction that awaits us in the future. To commence such a

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<sup>81</sup> W.S. Johnson, *The Mystery of God: Karl Barth and the Postmodern Foundations of Theology*, 35.

<sup>82</sup> For just a hint of what such endeavours might involve, see R.W. Jenson, *Essays in Theology and Culture*.

<sup>83</sup> The dilemma is not new. The Apostle Paul recognised both dangers in his letters to the Corinthian church where he described the uncompromising message of the crucified Christ as a stumbling block to the Jews and foolishness to Gentiles (1 Cor. 1:23). Nevertheless, he upheld the essential *Logos* or truth of the Christian faith to those who would forsake the dialogue with culture altogether. See C.J.D. Greene, ‘Is the Message of the Cross Good News for the Twentieth Century?’, in J. Goldingay (ed.), *Atonement Today*, 222–39.

journey is not only to rejoice in the community of the saints, it is to be continually amazed and grateful for the theological versatility and perspicacity of one's former and contemporary companions along the way.

We contend that in the history of Christology there have been three main christological trajectories that continually witness to the fertile debate between the biblical horizons of faith and belief, the christological tradition and successive historical and cultural contexts. In what follows we will examine the cosmological and political Christology of the patristic and Byzantine era, which occupied the minds and souls of theologians from at least the second to the twelfth centuries of Christian faith and devotion. Both are examples of Christology from above and they not only changed the way theology was understood and practised, but simultaneously transformed the cultural contexts in which they were situated. We will then investigate an alternative approach, one which has been called anthropological Christology,<sup>84</sup> a branch which grew out of the same stem of orthodox Christology but which came to its full flowering in the Medieval and Reformation periods. At the same time, we will take particular note of the critical reduction of scale of this form of Christology which not only guaranteed its survival into the modern era but also bore major consequences for that continual dialogue between culture and theology to which Hans Küng refers:

Whoever (as often still happens) sees in the development of the modern conception of Christ since the Enlightenment mere apostasy not only undervalues the fertile impulses that emerged here, but also fails to appreciate the many flashbacks that are made to the representations of Christ from earlier ages.<sup>85</sup>

The flashbacks to which Küng refers alert us to the 'fertile impulses' of christological reflection that preceded the Enlightenment and postmodernity. They also underline the importance of the cultural perspectives we will explore in this study, because they are fundamental and crucial stages of transition in the history of christological deliberation.

We will endeavour to build our case accumulatively. In some chapters we will encounter specific issues and concerns that will demand a fuller analysis and exploration at a later stage in our journey. Similarly, we will arrive at our conclusions and perspectives from detailed investigation of the christological perspectives and reflections of particular theologians. The latter are not chosen at random, but are viewed as important representatives of particular cultural paradigms that have dominated christological reconstruction particularly in the modern era. Consequently, such strategic thinkers take their place as worthy

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<sup>84</sup> Cf. Moltmann, *Way*, and Kasper, *Jesus*.

<sup>85</sup> H. Küng, *The Incarnation of God*, 19.