PINNING DOWN THE CRISIS IN CONTEMPORARY
CHRISTOLOGY

By Wesley J. Wildman

It is said that there is a crisis in christology; this issue of dialog is devoted to that topic. In fact, there seem to be many crises in which christology is implicated. Here is a short list.

Liberation theology points out that many forms of christology seem disconnected with the political and economic dimensions of human suffering, raising the pointed question of whose interests such christologies tend to serve. Some feminist theology argues that the centralization of a male redeemer figure introduces patriarchal impulses into cultures influenced by Christianity and alienates women who find themselves unable to identify with a male savior. Similarly, traditional christology is diagnosed by some as responsible for other disastrous social consequences, including unchecked exploitation of the environment and anti-Jewish sentiments and actions. Indigenous theologies have often abandoned classical formulations of the person and work of Jesus Christ in order to present the significance of Jesus in ways that are contextually relevant, causing the most dramatic collapse of doctrinal unity in christology in the history of Christianity. The natural sciences, especially cosmology and evolutionary biology, present a vision of the world in which traditional assertions of the absolute salvific significance of Jesus Christ seem absurd. Growing awareness of the independent value of other religious traditions threatens to discredit the one-size-fits-all approach to salvation offered by traditional Christianity. The social sciences and the cross-cultural study of religions have made possible explanations of the efficacy of the Christ symbol and the origins and development of christological beliefs that are wholly independent of the truth of christological assertions. The psychology of religion has produced persuasive accounts of the post-Easter experiences of Jesus' disciples that have no need to assume the occurrence of a resurrection, bodily or otherwise. And the study of religious experience generally has made it clear that it is not self-authenticating, in the sense of carrying within itself assured information about its own cause; this obscures the meaning of believers' claims to experience Jesus Christ.

The list could be extended almost indefinitely. Its dominant theme, I would say, is a collapse of christological plausibility. Christological assertions are faced on every front with a breakdown of the traditional lines of justification. The decisive authority of the Bible has dissipated, as has the evidential value of religious experience, church tradition, historical research, and philosophical or theological argumentation. It appears that none of these lines of justification can, singly or in combination, render traditional

Wesley J. Wildman is an assistant professor of theology at Boston University. He is author of Fidelity with Plausibility: Modest Christologies in the Twentieth Century (SUNY, 1998). He is also co-editor with Mark Richardson of Building Bridges between Theology and Science (Routledge, 1996), which just won the Templeton prize for outstanding books in the field of Science and Religion.
christological assertions plausible. Now, that is a christological crisis because it calls into question the truth of christology and the entitlement of Christians to believe in the significance of Jesus Christ. I will return to this phalanx of interconnected problems as I conclude, but the point of beginning with it is simply to be clear that only one strand of this crisis is the focus of attention here: the so-called “problem of faith and history.”

The Faith-History Problem

The problem of faith and history is actually a cluster of problems. Two are pertinent to christology. The first is the challenge of historical access to Jesus of Nazareth, which raises the specter of never having enough of the right kind of information about that intriguing historical figure. The second is the question of the relation of faith and historical knowledge. The insight here is that faith in Jesus Christ typically presupposes certain crucial historical facts about Jesus’ person, ministry, self-understanding, passion, and the like; yet historical research in recent centuries has seemed unable to confirm many of these crucial facts. These historical presuppositions of christology are both more grandiose and more difficult to confirm historically when the christological claims made are adventurously lofty. While many believers have never had trouble believing almost anything about Jesus Christ, the theologian (on most interpretations of the task) is that accursed creature who worries about justification for holding such beliefs, and as such sees a problem in the dependence of faith on history that the ordinary believer may or may not notice.

These two aspects of the christological problem of faith and history came into clear focus in the eighteenth century. At that time, the Enlightenment’s insistence on keeping assent to entertained beliefs in proportion with evidence for those beliefs triggered a shift in the criteria for what counted as rational and faithful in Christian theology. Ironically, evidence mattered more than ever at the very same time that a rising tide of historical consciousness was radically thinning out the historical evidence capable of confirming christological assertions.

Thus began the first quest for the historical Jesus, which was a theologically motivated form of historical inquiry from the beginning. The plan was to apply the most sophisticated historical tools in the history of humanity to the task of reconstructing the historical figure of Jesus. The expectation was that the resulting portrait would most likely put to rest the problem of faith’s dependence on history by showing decisively that Jesus was more or less what Christian doctrine has always said he was.

Of course, nobody believed that historians could confirm the incarnation or the Trinity, but at least they could produce a portrait of Jesus that was consonant with such assertions. It stands as a tribute to the impartiality of these fine historians that the first quest concluded with a picture of Jesus that was utterly indigestible to the late nineteenth-century Christian mind: Weiss and Schweitzer’s apocalyptic enthusiast who was as mistaken about the imminent end of history as he was an intriguing and compelling leader. Moreover, the other major result of the first quest was a vastly increased skepticism about the capacity of the sources for a life of Jesus to deliver much reliable information. We were lucky if the best historians could produce even a minimal outline of Jesus’ life, character, and teaching, and what could be discovered with highest probability was theologically and religiously indigestible. So much for historical research helping out with the problem of faith and history.

The Apocalyptic U-Turn

This is not the place to extend the story of Jesus research. It is important to say, however, that we live in a time of renewed enthusiasm, at least in the United States. Whereas German Jesus scholarship has for the most part continued on the apocalyptic line of Weiss and Schweitzer, and whereas British scholarship never really was sold on it in the first place, North American scholarship has done a U-turn. The once-regnant apocalyptic interpretation of Jesus has been steadily losing its dominant grip to the point that perhaps half of active North American Jesus scholars think that it may be mistaken. Obviously this is a hotly contested issue, especially with the Jesus Seminar throwing its considerable weight more behind the anti-apocalyptic interpretation than behind the previously dominant apocalyptic view. Unsurprisingly, then, I am more than happy to leave the historical debates to the Jesus historians. But
there is a question of what the theologian should make of all this. There are a number of options.

With Wolfhart Pannenberg and Thomas Altizer, perhaps Christian theologians should develop their theologies around the more established apocalyptic view. As these two enormously creative theologians have demonstrated, there is plenty that can be done within an eschatological framework for christology. Alternatively, perhaps theologians should breathe a huge sigh of relief now that the supposedly indigestible Weiss-Schweitzer line has begun to lose its strangehold on the theological imagination. Surely now is an opportune time to wager that the apocalyptic elements of the New Testament derive not from Jesus but from his followers, and set about the task of basing a christology on Jesus, thought of as a sage, a teacher, a healer, a revolutionary, a prophet, a saint, or some mixture of these.

Yet another possibility suggests itself. Perhaps theologians should be alarmed by the fact that the disagreements among Jesus historians are becoming more severe and not less. Perhaps theologians should be wary of reliance on the new interdisciplinary methods with their greatly increased reliance on hermeneutical postures that determine for the historian which of the many elements relevant to producing an interpretation of Jesus should be given the most weight. Indeed, perhaps theologians should reason that the lack of convergence in the views of qualified Jesus researchers confirms the widespread opinion from earlier this century that the sources do not permit results even of the coarse resolution being sought. A christology, perhaps, ought to take its rise not on the life of Jesus but on the canonical Jesus, on the beliefs of the earliest Christian communities, on a supra-historical interpretation of the resurrection of Jesus, on the contemporary experience of encounter with Christ, or on the belief that Jesus Christ has simply been revealed beyond any possibility of confirmation or disconfirmation to be the very Word of God.

All of these theological options are in play at the present time. The result is that, quite apart from other elements of the crisis of plausibility I listed at the beginning of this article, there does indeed appear to be a crisis of the faith-and-history sort in christology. If that is really so, however, where are the signs of that christological faith-and-history crisis in Marcus Borg’s presentation in this issue of diálogo? They do not appear to be present to any great degree. Let us examine Borg’s point of view to find out how he has managed to solve or sidestep the problem.

---

Borg’s Dissolution of the Faith-and-History Crisis in Christology

Borg’s perspective is a remarkably self-assured integration of biblical scholarship and Christian commitment. Jesus here is a “Spirit person,” one who has “frequent and vivid experiences of the sacred” that are both noetic and transformative. The Spirit person Jesus was also a healer, a wisdom teacher, a social prophet, and a movement initiator. Each of these categories is recognizable from the history of religions, according to Borg, and has been instantiated many times before. Spirit people are not crazy because experience of the sacred is a universal factor in human life. Jesus and others like him just happen to be exceptionally responsive to the sacred, “unusually open to the encompassing Spirit” that Borg describes as both transcendent and immanent with the aid of a panentheistic model of God. That makes Jesus important, especially for those in the Christian movement, who continue to experience him as “a living sacred reality, a figure of the present and not of the past,” much as the first Christians did after Jesus’ execution. It is this particular form of the experience of the sacred that caused lofty titles to be ascribed to Jesus and that justifies the use of those titles and the resulting creational affirmations in Christian worship and theology. They are true because they are metaphors that successfully express the experience of the sacred in the form of Jesus as “an epiphany of God.”

Borg is not unrealistic about the fact that “millions” of Christians would deem such a vision of Jesus in conflict with their belief in his absolute uniqueness and significance. But he contends that in recent decades “an older vision of Christianity has come undone” for “millions of others” who no longer find persuasive a “literalistic, doctrinal, moralistic, exclusivist, and afterlife-oriented” Christianity. This group includes those who have left the churches but remain open to a new “way of seeing Jesus...and scripture” as well as those who remain in the churches hoping for the same thing. These people are “Christians of a non-literalistic and non-exclusivist sort, aware of global pluralism; aware also of the
relativity of all human mental constructions (including religious, doctrinal, historical, and scientific constructions), and suspicious of claims that have little or no connection to experience." Contemporary Jesus scholarship and especially the Jesus Seminar is nourishing the lives of such people and helping them to deepen their faith. And lest we think that the Jesus Seminar is out "to destroy traditional Christianity at any cost," Borg corrects the media's negative portrayal, which he puts down in part to a mistaken understanding of the four colors used by the Seminar to classify the sayings of Jesus. Moreover, his own integration of the results of the Seminar and Christian faith demonstrates that destroying Christianity is not on the agenda after all.

If there is a crisis in christology, for Borg, it is one felt only by those who are wedded to a defunct view of Christianity and so remain out of step with what we have come to know about the world. For those who have made the adjustment to the pluralistic, relativistic, and experientially grounded character of modern life, there is no problem. History and theology unite for such people and the christological crisis dissolves. Problem solved.

---

**Borg's Hard-Won Synthesis**

This is a breathtaking argument. I think it probably reflects a hard-won synthesis in Borg's own life and as such should be regarded as a notable achievement of both the intellectual and personal sorts. In contrast with many mainline Christian preachers who rise to the pulpit with nothing decisive to say about the significance of Jesus, or at least nothing about which they themselves feel convinced, Borg has a message. For him the gospel is tangible and potent because it simultaneously refers to the historical life of the Spirit-person Jesus and to our contemporary experience of the sacred that we rightly interpret in terms of that wonderful, intriguing figure.

Contemporary Jesus scholarship has thus defeated the intransigent modern problem of the dependence of faith on the historical Jesus not by solving the problem on its own terms but simply by ignoring it. That old problem is caused not so much by our ignorance of many of the details of Jesus' life and ministry but by inappropriate theological standards that are drawn from an outdated conception of Christian faith, of God, and of salvation. When that effete theological viewpoint is discarded, viola! The problem of not being able to justify with historical research what we say in our christologies disappears.

---

**Is Borg Like Harnack?**

While it doesn't detract from his achievement, it is worthwhile noticing that Borg's solution is at least a century old. Like Borg, German historian and theologian Adolf von Harnack wanted to end the nonsense of theologians wringing their hands over their habit of presuming in their christologies a great deal about the historical Jesus that historical scholarship could not confirm. Like Borg, Harnack wanted a potent Christian message to take the place of the insipid, pedantic rambling that was marginalizing Christianity in his own cultural context. Like Borg, Harnack adopted the double solution of solid historical research and theological revisionism to bring historical results and theological assertions about Jesus into harmony. And like Borg, Harnack wrote a best-selling book that laid out the new historical and theological view of Jesus; in fact, Harnack's book was so popular it was translated into numerous languages within a couple of years of its publication [the English title is *What is Christianity?*] and Harnack became a popular celebrity, a hero of ordinary, educated Christians around the world.

Harnack's and Borg's approaches are essentially the same. Both espouse a vision of Jesus as a spiritual genius, a social prophet, a wisdom teacher, and a movement initiator, though Borg emphasizes Jesus as a healer more than Harnack did. Both blame the apocalyptic tone of the presentation of Jesus in the gospels on the early Christians and specifically deny that Jesus had an apocalyptic self-understanding, though Harnack, ever mindful of the inadvisability of unexplained historical discontinuities (and perhaps more prudently than some of the fellows of the Jesus Seminar) allowed that Jesus probably had a typically Jewish eschatological mindset. Both abandon literal interpretations of traditional christological claims as the central strategic move in solving the problem of the dependence of christology on unverifiable historical claims, though Borg tries harder than Harnack did to retrieve classical theological assertions as meta-
phorical expressions of a valid experience of the sacred, mediated through the symbol and stories of Jesus.

Well, then, should we conclude that there has been no christological crisis of faith and history for right-thinking Christians for a hundred years? As a matter of fact, we could do the same routine with early-nineteenth-century theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher, whose life of Jesus was strongly resonant with his christology, a christology that is similar to Harnack’s and Borg’s. Perhaps we should rather say that the problem has been solved for two hundred years, so long as sound historical research is joined with a suitably modern christology that renounces literalistic readings of traditional christological assertions. Against this historical trajectory, Borg’s contribution appears to be the latest repetition of a long-standing historical and theological position, one that apparently bears frequent repeating. For his continuation of this traditional line of solution to the problem of faith and history, we should be grateful to Borg, even if we disagree with his historical reconstruction of Jesus or with his view of how much is enough with regard to christological assertions about the person and work of Jesus Christ. That said, let us pause to evaluate the longstanding solution with which Borg throws in his lot.

---

Evaluating Borg’s Proposal

I have argued that Borg’s solution (or dissolution) of the vexing problem of faith and history has two wings: an historical wing, which for him is powered by the work of the Jesus Seminar, and a theological wing, about which he seems less prepared to go into details but which seems reasonably clear in outline.

With regard to the historical wing, it seems that Borg is sufficiently convinced of his non-eschatological interpretation of Jesus that he sees no need to register opposing historical points of view in his theological interpretation. Many theologians, taking in the entire sweep of Jesus research, are far from optimistic about the wisdom of such an approach. Borg and others who follow Harnack’s line are willing to put all the christological eggs (such as they are) in one historical basket at a time when there are a lot of baskets lying around, each of which may or may not be strong enough to take the weight. Should not there be a more judicious sorting and testing of the historical accommodations for an interpretation of the significance of Jesus Christ? For example, ought not a properly cautious historian conclude from the manifold interpretations presently being defended by reputable colleagues that indeed the sources are not capable of resolving many of the debates on which almost all historical presentations of Jesus (and certainly Borg’s and Harnack’s) take stands?

Perhaps confidence in one’s own view can be so compelling that skepticism about the sources can be held in abeyance, as seems to have been the case for Harnack. Nevertheless, it does not take a professional Jesus scholar to see that widespread conflicts of interpretation demand explanation in terms of the character and quality of the sources. None of this means that Borg ought to refrain from offering a theological interpretation of Jesus. Far from it. Rather, a theological presentation of the significance of Jesus ought not represent the sources as positively supportive when in fact they merely allow in neutral fashion the theological portrayal being advanced even as they allow many conflicting theological portrayals. In other words, historians and theologians alike should be anxious to show not only that their sources are consistent with the view they hold but also that they are consistent with views they reject, and may indeed be too vague in some respects to resolve crucial debates. I think it can be shown that Harnack suppressed this properly scholarly instinct in order to advance his own research program and I think Borg may be doing the same thing.

With regard to the theological wing of the point of view Harnack and Borg and others espouse, other points need to be made. It is hard to complain about Harnack’s or Borg’s attempts to say something potent about the significance of Jesus based directly on his life and work. It is refreshing in addition to possessing the other virtues I mentioned above. But the theological environment that makes these contributions appear so refreshing does not adopt contorted and obscure procedures for nothing. On the contrary, they are wearisomely complex for an excellent reason: they are trying to be precise and to register as many levels of complexity in christology as they can. I might be glad to read a presentation that cuts through the hard-working mass of carefully crafted theological reflection on Jesus Christ with a luminous celebration.
of the theological relevance of the historical person Jesus. But I am in no doubt about where I must go to think out the various problems with due care: back into the details of that hard-working literature with a determination to take account of as many perspectives and levels of complexity as my energy and wit allow. For that purpose, Harnack’s and Borg’s approaches serve as no more than interesting ideas that might be capable of guiding more sustained christological construction.

The Devil in the Details

The devil is in the details, it seems. Rather than engaging Borg’s theological perspective point-by-point, I will make only one criticism that will open up salient details: Borg has gone too far in his christological pruning. All of the virtues of his christological viewpoint can be preserved while greatly increasing continuity with the classical christological tradition. The connection between christology and the historical Jesus will have to be more dialectical than Borg makes it, allowing for multiple possible outcomes of Jesus research as demanded by our infuriating sources; but I have just argued for historiographical reasons that he ought to be more prudent in this area anyway. This kind of conservatism is important in a christology if fidelity to the classical christological tradition and service of ecclesiastical institutions figure even slightly in the criteria for christological adequacy.

A More Complete Proposal

The key theological virtue of Borg’s interpretation of Jesus is its rejection of the idea that the symbol of Jesus Christ is absolutely, uniquely, unsurpassably significant for revelation and salvation. In Fidelity with Plausibility: Modest Christologies in the Twentieth Century (SUNY, 1997) I dub that the “absolutist principle.” It is the true fault line in the contemporary crisis of christology, debates over incarnation or Jesus’ apocalyptic self-consciousness are side issues. I think it is because of a visceral allergy to christological (and biblical) absolutism that the millions of disenchanted Christians of whom Borg speaks feel the need to distance themselves from traditional churches and ecclesiastical christology. These folk could be content with a number of different christological proposals (that is where Borg’s diagnosis of them is incomplete, though it would take a large-scale study to test this hypothesis) so long as the christology did not have offensively and implausibly absolutist characteristics.

Borg is surely right that many find recent Jesus research spiritually invigorating, but it is its anti-absolutist suggestions that are appealing in most cases rather than the details of the portrait. After all, it is not solely Borg’s view that is appreciated but the general theological suggestiveness of recent Jesus research, even from pro-apocalyptic quarters as I think Alzinger has demonstrated in The Contemporary Jesus. That is just as well, I should think, for it would be unreasonable to demand the kind of unanimity of metaphysical and symbolic imagination in the churches that centralizing Borg’s christology would require. We can even celebrate apocalyptic interpretations of Jesus, against the weight of the Jesus seminar, so long as they are not absolutist in character (and this is possible).

Rejection of the absolutist principle is required to achieve plausibility of christology in our time. Moreover, the resulting increase in vigor of the gospel message in our context confirms what I have argued at length in Fidelity with Plausibility on other grounds: that this is also the best way to achieve fidelity to the classical christological tradition. We do not need to leave behind the millions of supernaturals, incarnationalists, believers in resurrection and afterlife, or supporters of the blood atonement of Christ in order to achieve a plausible, faithful, compelling theological portrayal of the significance of Jesus Christ. We need only to leave behind absolutist readings of such doctrines (and appropriately modest readings are possible). In particular, the christological modesty and evangelical, spiritual potency achieved by rejecting the absolutist principle is consistent with incarnational christology. This is to say that literal, metaphysical incarnation and not merely Borg’s and John Hick’s metaphorical incarnation can be seen as consistent. In fact, modest or anti-absolutist christologies come in two types: the incarnational christologies such as we see in John Cobb, Raimon Pannikar, and many other contemporary theologians, and the inspirational, anti-incarnational christologies such as we see in Ernst Troeltsch, Hick, and
[albeit sketchily] Borg. Both types are more intellectually and religiously feasible than any absolutist christology.

While I appreciate Borg’s constructive foray into christology, therefore, I wish that he would more clearly state that his kind of inspirational, anti-incarnational christology is not the place to take a stand and fight. We need to do battle over the absolutist principle and by its repudiation reclaim the evangelical and intellectual potency of the Christian gospel. Drawing the line at that point is properly supportive of the complex interests of ecclesiastical institutions; it is more clearly honest about the limitations on what the sources for Jesus research can deliver to us by way of a well-attested, consensus-driven reconstruction of the historical figure of Jesus, it still allows for a range of speculative over-beliefs about Jesus [such as Borg’s or Cobb’s or Hick’s or mine] that are consistent with the historical sources without being fully determined by them; and it is more continuous with what I take to be the deep insights of the classical christological tradition.

There is one last virtue in seeing the dividing line in contemporary christology as running through the debate over the absolutist principle. It is this: each of the elements of the contemporary crisis in christology that I mentioned in the first paragraph is greatly eased by the repudiation of the absolutist principle. To the extent that the crisis in contemporary christology is a crisis of plausibility, therefore, it is modest christologies, whether incarnational or inspirational, that offer the most faithful and plausible way forward, resolving a wide range of apparently unrelated christological worries in the process.