

## Basic Christological Distinctions

**Abstract:** This essay surveys major distinctions used to classify and gain insight into contemporary christologies, clarifying some confusions about them. The focus is on distinctions pertaining to christological starting points (from above, from below), schemas (cosmological, anthropological, eschatological, dialectical), styles (historical versus ideal, ontological versus functional), and results (high versus low, literally and figuratively incarnational, absolutist and anti-absolutist or modest). The essay concludes with an argument that the absolutist-modest distinction helps to diagnose several important fault lines in contemporary christology.

A quick glance over a forty-one-page stretch of the English translation of Jürgen Moltmann's *The Way of Jesus Christ* reveals many qualifications of "christology."<sup>1</sup> Sometimes the qualifiers are closer to simple adjectives than already established terms or terms likely to catch on, and the meanings of some terms partially overlap. Here are some of the contrasting terms, with rough equivalents indicated by the equal sign:

- christology of the way (*christologia viae*) versus christology of the home country (*christologia patriae*)
- christology of faith versus christology of sight
- metaphysical christology (= orthodox christology = cosmological christology) versus historical christology (= Jesuology = anthropological christology) versus eschatological christology

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1. Jürgen Moltmann, *The Way of Jesus Christ: Christology in Messianic Dimensions* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1990), 33–73.

- Christian christology versus Jewish messianic hope
- christology from above versus christology from below
- ascendent christology versus descendent christology (= Incarnation christology)
- holistic christology (= integral christology) versus truncated christology
- chiliastic christology versus christology of history
- apologetic christology versus therapeutic christology
- orthodox maximalism versus christological minimalism

Moltmann also uses many stand-alone terms: christology for pilgrims (*christologia viatorum*), doxological christology, christology of the home country, postmodern christology, high christology, Spirit christology (= pneumatological christology), ecclesiological christology, theological christology, two-nature christology, biblical christology, christology of self-transcendence, and social christology. There are also many other terms from other authors in circulation. We are swimming in terminology, it seems, and that's just forty pages of Moltmann.

While this richness of language is indicative of the fecundity of the christological reflection of recent theology, it highlights the need for clarification of terminology. A discussion of some of the most common christological distinctions would be helpful in that regard; it might also shed light on the christological methods and styles that have been tried out in the modern period. I shall do that in what follows and then conclude with a more detailed discussion of a distinction that focuses on absolutism in the results of christology.

### Starting Points for Christology: From Above and from Below

The terms most frequently used when offering analyses of alternative approaches to developing a christology are “from below” and “from above.”<sup>2</sup> The same pair of ideas is often expressed by means of the images of “ascending” and “descending.”<sup>3</sup> At issue is how Jesus Christ is to be thought of at the

2. See, for example, John Macquarrie, *Jesus Christ in Modern Thought* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1990), 342–43; Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Jesus—God and Man*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1977), 33–37.

3. A number of cognate phrases have come into English by translation from non-English works. So we have “descent-” and “ascent-Christology” in Walter Kasper, *Jesus the Christ* (New York: Paulist Press, 1976), 37–38; “Christology of ascent” and “Christology of descent” in Jon Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1978), 337; and “ascending” and “descending” christology in Moltmann, *Way of Jesus Christ*, 49. Pannenberg defines his terms as follows:

commencement of the process of elaborating a christology. Christologies from below begin with the man, Jesus of Nazareth, considered first of all as a man, and then move on to consider his significance and his relation to God. Christologies from above begin with the concept of the Incarnation of divinity in a historical human life and work toward the application of this concept to the person Jesus. There is much at stake in the choice between these two methodological emphases, beginning with the tone of presentation. Also on the line is the epistemic puzzle of whether and how we know what is required to establish the chosen starting point; both have their infamous difficulties.

The application of these two labels to actual christologies is more difficult than it might seem at first. The christology of Edward Schillebeeckx may be the clearest contemporary example of a christology from below, because his doctrine of Christ emerges from a comprehensive and detailed critical analysis of the biblical witness concerning Jesus of Nazareth.<sup>4</sup> Understandably, few theologians enter into the biblical material at the same depth as Schillebeeckx has in his monumental effort. Most contemporary christologies beginning from below do so in a less thoroughgoing sense. The christologies (or christological hinting) of John Baillie, Marcus Borg, Rudolf Bultmann, John Dominic Crossan, Don Cupitt, James D. G. Dunn, Eberhard Jüngel, John Macquarrie, Jürgen Moltmann, Wolfhart Pannenberg, John Robinson, and Jon Sobrino, to name just a few, are christologies with an ascending initial trajectory. All of these christologies begin with analysis of Jesus' life, but they either limit the historical analysis by comparison with Schillebeeckx or they limit the christological construction based on that analysis, again, compared with Schillebeeckx. It is understandable that most New Testament scholars—and even the biblical theologians—don't usually go the whole way from historical-critical research into

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"For Christology that begins 'from above,' from the divinity of Jesus, the concept of the incarnation stands in the center. A Christology 'from below,' rising from the historical man Jesus to the recognition of his divinity, is concerned first of all with Jesus' message and fate and arrives only at the end at the concept of the incarnation" (*Jesus—God and Man*, 33). The form of expression chosen by Pannenberg, while essentially correct, prejudices certain important christological results, most obviously the divinity of Jesus. This is harmless in most cases, but some christologies deny Jesus' divinity in the sense in which Pannenberg affirms it, and they too can operate with an ascending methodological emphasis. At one point, Moltmann puts the difference thus: "A Christology which traces the path from Christ's death on the cross to his resurrection presents a kind of 'ascendance' Christology, from below upwards; whereas every incarnation Christology pursues the path of the eternal Son of God from above downwards, and is a 'descendence' Christology" (*Way of Jesus Christ*, 49). Though this is not his main discussion of the distinction, it is nevertheless worth noting that linking an ascendance christology with the resurrection is a dubious procedure.

4. See Schillebeeckx, *Jesus: An Experiment in Christology* (New York: Crossroad, 1979), and *Christ: The Experience of Jesus as Lord* (New York: Crossroad, 1980).

the life of Jesus to a fully developed christology: it is an extremely complicated path. Schillebeeckx's effort remains the standard for this kind of procedure.

Christologies from above, unlike their ascending counterparts, are rather rare in the twentieth century. The outstanding example is the christology of Karl Barth, in which the theme of the Incarnation of the Word of God is richly and dramatically unfolded. Other dialectical theologians, most notably Emil Brunner, also have presented descending christologies, as have some Reformed and evangelical theologians, but there are few examples as clear-cut outside those domains. Even Barth's christology became less exclusively descending as his thought matured and his context changed. In Barth's later christology, represented most clearly by *The Humanity of God* and volumes 3 and 4 of his *Church Dogmatics* (on the doctrines of creation and reconciliation), humanity and divinity are profoundly understood as taken up into one another. This ameliorates to a considerable extent the severity of the descending moment of Barth's earlier christology, though it may also already suggest the limited value of the distinction itself.

In fact, most christologies from the twentieth century that might possibly be described as descending, in contrast to ascending, actually resist definitive classification in terms of this dichotomy. Any christological proposal since the time of Immanuel Kant and Friedrich Schleiermacher has virtually demanded a strongly anthropological emphasis, even if the anthropology is transcendental or in some other way importantly different from what modern university science departments tend to suggest is the case with human beings. However, there are some notable christologies in which the descending impulse is decisive, even if it is accompanied by a clear ascending impulse. For example, Paul Tillich's ontology and John Cobb's process metaphysics introduce a distinctly descending accent in their christologies by beginning with a distinctive metaphysical framework. Moreover, neither theologian offers much analysis of the biblical material concerning Jesus' life. A type of christology from above that was common at various times during the modern period, kenotic christology, is enjoying something of a revival at the hands of Brian Hebblethwaite and a number of other theologians.<sup>5</sup> And conservative evangelical theology continues to pursue christology in the descending mode of post-Reformation Protestant scholasticism, the intended result of which is that it remains out of step with

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5. Note, however, that Moltmann's kenoticism seems to avoid the characteristic descending impetus by its strong emphasis on Jesus' ministry, proclamation, and concern for justice. See Moltmann, *Way of Jesus Christ*, 73–273. It seems, then, that kenotic christologies do not support the descending impulse in as clear-cut a way as might be thought at first glance.

many of the most significant conceptual characteristics of contemporary Western thought.<sup>6</sup>

While the ascending-descending distinction is useful—in a limited way, as we have already seen—for describing an *initial impulse* in the methodology of christological construction, christological results are not determined by their methodological starting points. After all, in most of the cases just cited, what begins from below soon enough incorporates complementary insights, and vice versa. So the themes of Incarnation, kenosis, and exaltation lead, on the descending model, to the natural question of to whom such remarkable claims are supposed to apply and how this is to be known. Likewise, for at least one ascending approach, the human history of Jesus may initially determine the nature of Christ for christological reflection, but the way this history is interpreted quickly introduces other themes. To judge that in Christ the self-transcendent possibilities of humanity and its history are fully or normatively realized is to imply that they are in principle capable of such realization and that the divine is therefore somehow immanent in history, perhaps preeminently in Jesus Christ.

### Schemas for Christology: Cosmological, Anthropological, Eschatological, and Dialectical

A second distinction sometimes encountered is akin to the first and also bears on christological methodology. Walter Kasper differentiates between cosmological, anthropological, and world-historical christologies.<sup>7</sup> Moltmann draws a similar distinction between cosmological, anthropological, and eschatological christologies.<sup>8</sup> In both cases, the “anthropological” and “cosmological” designations are intended to correspond roughly with the ascending and descending categories, and the third type is supposed to express a different approach altogether. The simple equation of the anthropological-cosmological and ascending-descending

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6. Two of the better-known conservative evangelical systematic theologians with this characteristic are Cornelius Van Til and Donald Bloesch. For their respective christologies, see Cornelius Van Til, *The New Modernism: An Appraisal of the Theology of Barth and Brunner* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1946); and Donald G. Bloesch, *Essentials of Evangelical Theology*, 2 vols. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1982). More recent evangelical systematic theologies that thoughtfully continue resistance to elements of modern thought include Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998); Norman L. Geisler, *Systematic Theology*, 3 vols. (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 2002–2005); Wayne A. Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994); Thomas C. Oden, *Systematic Theology*, 3 vols. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987–1992); and Robert L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith*, 2nd ed. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1998).

7. See Kasper, *Jesus the Christ*, 17–18.

8. See Moltmann, *Way of Jesus Christ*, 46–72.

pairs or terms suggests that the introduction of a third category, world-historical or eschatological christologies, effectively constitutes a critique of the ascending-descending distinction. It is therefore worth noting that this simple equation does not hold up under close examination.

Anthropological christologies are controlled primarily by a preestablished conception of human being, a conception that may stay within the boundaries of the conventional anthropology of the modern secular university (for example, Ernst Troeltsch, John Hick, and Gordon Kaufman) or may pass beyond them by introducing transcendental elements (for example, Karl Rahner and Paul Tillich). However, it is not just the starting point of an anthropological christology that is determined by this conception of human being. Rather, such a christology is guided through the whole process of its development along the tracks of its anthropological outlook. In an ascending christology, initial anthropological insights can in principle be superseded or even abrogated by subsequent elements of the christological doctrine. This is so, for example, whenever the Chalcedonian definition is reaffirmed by a christology that begins with an investigation of Jesus' life: the initial anthropologically conventional assumption of one nature gives way to the conclusion that Jesus actually had two natures. Not so for anthropological christologies, in which the fully developed christology is a consistent outworking of the anthropological perspective.<sup>9</sup>

Likewise, a cosmological christology is guided and controlled—not simply started—by an overarching metaphysical conception of the cosmos, sometimes informed by contemporary scientific cosmology and often influenced by the traditional theology of the divine Logos. A descending christology will invariably begin with some unsystematic insights about reality as a whole but will be a cosmological christology only if those insights are organically incorporated into a schema that moves christological reflection toward full elaboration in terms of that schema.<sup>10</sup>

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9. Of course, it is important to note that this guiding anthropology does not have to be limited to the insights of the secular university, though it would have to include and account for them. Indeed, Christian intuitions about Jesus, formed by biblical stories and contemporary experiences, usually help to determine the guiding anthropology. Karl Barth is the outstanding example in this regard, because he makes methodologically explicit the structuring of his anthropology around the nature of Jesus, the God-man. See *Church Dogmatics*, III/2, *The Doctrine of Creation* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1960), esp. §43: "As the man Jesus is Himself the revealing Word of God. He is the source of our knowledge of the nature of man as created by God" (3).

10. Examples begin early in the history of Christian thought with Justin, who saw the *logos spermatikos*, or seed of the Logos, in human reason. In modern theology, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin and John Cobb have produced outstanding examples of cosmological christologies. The same emphasis is evident in a variety of ways in the realist metaphysics of William Temple, Lionel Thornton, Samuel Alexander, and Lloyd Morgan.

In addition to the cosmological and anthropological types, the eschatological or world-historical schema is sometimes introduced either (1) as a generalization of anthropology or (2) as a specification of cosmology. In the first case, when humans are regarded in their social, biological, ecological, intellectual, and historical context, questions about human meaning and salvation must inevitably lead to further questions about the meaning and end of history in the most comprehensive sense. In the other case, when a cosmology is fully developed, it yields a philosophy of history that can be made relevant to salvation only by means of the question of the value and purpose of history. In either mode of presentation, the same question of universal history is uncovered. Friedrich Schelling and Georg Hegel bequeathed profound treatments of this question to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Their conception of universal history was sometimes corrected and sometimes transformed initially by other thinkers such as David Friedrich Strauss, Karl Marx, Ludwig Feuerbach, and Alois Biedermann, and then again in the light of new discoveries in the realms of evolutionary biology and physical cosmology. Older conceptions of eschatology and universal history, both religious and philosophical, as ancient as the cradles of civilization, also contribute to the eschatological or world-historical schema.

A number of theologians in recent decades have made fruitful use of modified versions of Schelling's and Hegel's philosophies of history, beginning with Paul Tillich, for whom Schelling was particularly important.<sup>11</sup> In *Jesus—God and Man*, Pannenberg has followed with a christology in the context of universal history that depends on a creative modification of the Hegelian system in the light of biblical eschatology. Moltmann's *The Way of Jesus Christ* uses Hegel in a related way and goes on to emphasize the theme of justice. Others such as Carl Braaten, Robert Jenson, and Ted Peters have developed christologies along similar lines, springing out of a conception of universal history that can be called the trinitarian history of God.<sup>12</sup> World-historical christologies drawing solely on the supernaturalism of biblical eschatology have for some time been confined to conservative evangelical and biblically fundamentalist theologians. At present, christologies following the world-historical schema tend to take

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11. See Paul Tillich, *The Interpretation of History* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1936), and "A Reinterpretation of the Doctrine of the Incarnation," *Church Quarterly Review* 147 (January 1949) 13–148.

12. See Carl Braaten and Robert Jenson, eds., *Christian Dogmatics* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), especially the second locus, "The Triune God," by Jenson, and the sixth locus, "The Person of Jesus Christ," by Braaten. See also Ted Peters, *God—The World's Future* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992).

their inspiration equally from Hegel and from biblical eschatology; other potential sources are mostly unexploited. For example, process christologies have tended to limit themselves to the cosmological schema of process metaphysics. However, despite the lack of a basis for a more fully rounded conception of the meaning and shape of history in Alfred North Whitehead or Charles Hartshorne, process theologians could still develop the cosmology in this direction. Likewise, little advantage has been taken of the grand historical visions of India, though the christologies of Stanley Samartha and Raimon Panikkar provide exceptions.

While christologies naturally begin from below and from above, there is no such restriction on christological schemas. The three so far discussed are dominant at present, but there are others, at least one of which has been of great importance in the twentieth century. Karl Barth's christology follows a schema deriving from Søren Kierkegaard's dialectical method, which posits qualitative distinctions—against Hegel's quantitative distinctions—between time and eternity, between humanity and God, between evil and good, between existential knowledge and historical judgment, “between the historical element in Christianity (the paradox that the eternal came into existence once in time) and the history of Christianity, the history of its followers,” between this paradox as it is tested by human reflection and the same paradox as the means by which humans are tested.<sup>13</sup> The possibility of developing a christology according to this dialectical schema answers a warning of Hans Urs von Balthasar to the effect that conforming a christology to an anthropological, cosmological, or world-historical schema reduces faith in Jesus Christ to mere anthropology, philosophy, or ideology.<sup>14</sup> While this counsel is prudent, von Balthasar himself would doubtless have regarded the wholesale abandonment of christological schemas as an overreaction, leading only to unclarity of thought.<sup>15</sup>

Because the labels designating the starting points for christologies may be difficult to apply unequivocally, they may also be less useful than those terms that describe types of christological schemas. A couple of examples illustrate

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13. Søren Kierkegaard, *Authority and Revelation* (Princeton, 1955), 58, quoted in Claude Welch, *Protestant Theology in the Nineteenth Century*, vol. 1 (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1972), 306.

14. The warning is reported in Kasper, *Jesus the Christ*, 18, and derives from Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Glaubhaft ist nur Liebe* (Einsiedeln, 1963).

15. Should the suspicion of schemas seem sufficiently pronounced, the dialectical schema offers a systematic way of keeping ideological temptations in check, without abandoning the rich resources that other schemas have to offer the task of developing a christology. However, any schema can build in safeguards against ideological reduction, so that limitation to a dialectical schema is unnecessarily restrictive.



the fact that christological starting points are subservient to christological schemas. Only the simplest christologies exhibit a clear starting point; most resist categorization.

For instance, the christology of Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki, like all process christologies, quite naturally develops according to a cosmological schema; this impels her christology initially in a descending direction.<sup>16</sup> Yet Suchocki takes seriously the humanity of Jesus—evidenced by her penetrating exploration of biblical stories about the life of Jesus and her focus on purported events illustrating Jesus' actual personality and behavior—and she conceives the christological task in part as trying to say what makes Jesus different from other humans. This distinctive accent introduces an ascending impulse into the starting direction of Suchocki's christology. The end result is a cosmological christology that defies univocal categorization as descending or ascending.

Karl Rahner's christology offers a second good example of the limited usefulness of the ascending and descending labels. He grounded the christology of his earlier writings in the awareness of the humanity of Jesus, but this humanity is conceived of in the light of an undergirding transcendental anthropology. This anthropology regarded human beings as a product of a long evolutionary process in which appear a drive to self-transcendence and a deep longing for authentic existence. Jesus Christ, understood in the first instance as human in this sense, is then interpreted as the culmination within our history of human possibilities. Rahner's significance as a theologian derived in part from the relatively successful way in which his christology—sensitive to the demands of modernity—conformed to an anthropological schema and yet did not sacrifice the sense of the transcendent without which classical anthropological christologies eventually founder.

Rahner's christology was thus clearly anthropological, but it is difficult to classify it as ascending or descending. The anthropological emphasis constitutes an ascending impulse, to be sure. But the anthropology is creatively different from many other christologies from below because of its transcendent dimension. The ground of this transcendent dimension for Rahner was prevenient divine grace, which naturally introduced a descending impulse, even in his early christology. This became explicit in Rahner's later writings, in which his transcendental anthropology is positioned within a broader world-historical schema—the conception of a graced universe as the setting for the dynamic historical

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16. See Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki, *God Christ Church: A Practical Guide to Process Theology* (New York: Crossroad, 1989).

unfolding of divine self-revelation. At this point the original “from above” impetus—present from the beginning—was disclosed as thoroughly consonant with the “from below” trajectory arising from the anthropological concern.

### Styles of Christology: Historical and Ideal, Ontological and Functional

In addition to christological starting points and schemas, there are a large number of distinctions that describe the mode or style of development of a christology. I will discuss two of the most important of such distinctions here.

Ever since the rise of biblical criticism, with some notable exceptions such as neoorthodox christology, there has been widespread agreement that christology must proceed, as Schillebeeckx puts it, with “Jesus of Nazareth [as the] norm and criterion of any interpretation of Jesus.”<sup>17</sup> The very clear judgment that flows from the pages of Albert Schweitzer’s *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* is that this method is harder to carry out than was initially thought. Many of the nineteenth-century “Lives of Jesus” attempted to uncover the personality and activity of Jesus of Nazareth but failed. Or better, they succeeded too well, for they claimed to discover what appears to lie beyond the powers of critical historical work to discover. The corruption of these attempts to unearth a historical personality is convincingly argued by Schweitzer to derive in the first instance from the incompleteness of the sources and then from the projection onto Jesus of contemporary humanitarian and ethical ideals. The character of the biblical sources and the nature of what those sources attest is such that, to some extent at least, Schillebeeckx’s dictum is inevitably reversed in practice: our interpretations of Jesus Christ unavoidably function as the norm and criterion for our historical judgments about Jesus of Nazareth.

If the biblical records dealt with Jesus’ life in a different way than they do—say, by being detailed biographies rather than gospels; by self-consciously presenting multiple, competing interpretations of Jesus in the manner of balanced journalism; by providing a complete chronology; by indicating as much as is known about how the stories about Jesus and the early churches came to be known; and by giving clear indications of the degree of assurance with which various statements are made (all of which is more or less unthinkable)—then it is conceivable that the situation might be different. However, this is not the case. There is a dialectical relationship between the Jesus of Nazareth whom we seek

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17. Schillebeeckx, *Jesus*, 43.

to grasp with historical tools and the religious interpretation of Jesus Christ that leads us to think of Jesus as a person of historical interest in the first place. Each conditions the other and, while this state of affairs neither rules out some reliable historical knowledge about Jesus of Nazareth nor prevents appropriate interpretation of Jesus Christ, the two cannot be separated from each other, especially where the personality and self-understanding of Jesus are concerned.

This is the basis of the distinction between historical and ideal styles of christology. Historical christologies make every attempt to follow Schillebeeckx's dictum, while ideal christologies emphasize the inverted dictum, usually from a sense of the difficulty of accessing Jesus of Nazareth through the biblical source material. As already noted, Schillebeeckx himself is responsible for the premier contemporary example of a historical christology. On the other side, ideal christologies can be pursued in a number of ways. Christologies adhering to a cosmological or world-historical schema are usually dramatically ideal. Even anthropological christologies, particularly those with distinctive conceptions of the human person, can be ideal in style. The existentialist christologies of Friedrich Gogarten, Rudolf Bultmann, and John Macquarrie's early work serve as cases in point.<sup>18</sup> Rahner's christology is another anthropological christology that is ideal in style. Ideal in a different and less obvious way, christologies such as those of Martin Kähler, Rudolf Bultmann, and Schubert Ogden emphasize the early church's proclamation of Jesus Christ, rather than the historical personality and teaching of Jesus.<sup>19</sup>

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18. The fact that Bultmann's christology is powered by existentialist insights and also focuses on the early church's proclamation of Jesus Christ rather than on Jesus' historical personality and teaching shows that christologies can be ideal in several senses simultaneously. In this regard see James F. Kay, *Christus Praesens: A Reconsideration of Rudolf Bultmann's Christology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994).

19. With different emphases, Martin Kähler and Rudolf Bultmann also developed christologies that begin from the Jesus Christ of biblical proclamation, rather than the historical person of Jesus. As a result, their first commitment was to historical research that uncovers this earliest proclamation, rather than the historical Jesus himself. Though this is ideal rather than historical in one sense, it is important to note that neither Bultmann nor Kähler understood their procedures in this way. Making use of the distinction between *Historie* and *Geschichte* for which Kähler is famous, they both thought that the so-called historical Jesus (*historische Jesus*) was not as concretely historical (i.e., *geschichtlich*) as the biblical Christ, for only in the latter are the full implications of Jesus Christ present. This also appears to be Ogden's point of view. On this, see Kähler, *The So-Called Historical Jesus and the Historic Biblical Christ* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1964), in which the main point is stated in the introductory remarks (42–45); and Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, 2 vols. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1951–1955), esp. 1:3 and 33–37. Yet it is possible to disagree with this assessment of Bultmann and Kähler and to begin New Testament theology and christology with research into the historical Jesus. Precisely to the extent that this is possible—and many think it is without succumbing to the dangers Kähler points out—both Bultmann and Kähler should still be thought of as proceeding with an ideal style, albeit in a different sense than the way this appears in the other examples of it adduced here.

Second, the traditional division of christological presentation into the person and work of Jesus Christ leads to another distinction of style. Christologies that emphasize the being of Jesus are ontological in style, whereas those that emphasize the doing of Jesus Christ are practical or functional. As John Macquarrie points out in his discussion of these terms, the modern period has displayed some impatience with medieval metaphysical discussions of Jesus and has sometimes been content to limit its attention to the functional side as a result.<sup>20</sup> Against this trend, Macquarrie insists upon the inseparability of the questions of being and doing in application to Jesus Christ. He criticizes the desire to prescind from ontological questions as ultimately anti-intellectual, because it is unrealistic. Every statement about the activity and teaching of Jesus Christ inevitably poses more or less directly the question of the nature of the one who did and said these things. While Macquarrie introduces the distinction only to criticize christologies that are unbalanced in one direction or the other, the distinction makes sense and is sometimes used for discussions of more balanced christologies in which one or the other theme is emphasized. For example, Friedrich Schleiermacher's christology, in interpreting the person of Jesus Christ in terms of the intensity of his God-consciousness and the necessity for this intensity in terms of the actuality of his redemptive work, exhibits what can be called a functionalist emphasis, though the person and work of Jesus Christ are never separated from each other.<sup>21</sup> On the other hand, many cosmological christologies tend also to have an ontological emphasis, once again, without ever isolating ontological questions from issues of the work of Jesus Christ.

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20. See Macquarrie, *Jesus Christ in Modern Thought*, 3–9. Macquarrie does not cite anyone here, and he does seem to put his point rather more strongly than is warranted. However, there are examples of this exclusive functionalism, even though they may not involve the anti-intellectualism with which Macquarrie charges them. For example, Michael Goulder, "Jesus, the Man of Universal Destiny," in *The Myth of God Incarnate*, ed. John Hick (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1977), argues for a unity of the agency of Jesus and God and not a unity of substance. Goulder thinks he thereby circumvents the need for supernaturalist metaphysical claims: historical knowledge is enough for the purposes of understanding Jesus' significance as a man of destiny carrying on universal transformative activity. D. M. Baillie, *God Was in Christ: An Essay on Incarnation and Atonement* (London: Faber & Faber, 1956) holds a similar position. There are also affinities between Goulder's view and Karl Barth's early christology, in which God's providential designation of Jesus as the Christ renders superfluous the question of any metaphysical analysis of the relation between Jesus and God. Of course, in Barth's case, as has already been pointed out, this divine designation overwhelms the historical givenness of Jesus, making the details fundamentally unimportant. Goulder's approach, on the other hand, leads directly into historical investigation of the historical activity and personality of Jesus. Macquarrie may still counter that metaphysical claims about the world, and indirectly about Jesus, are made implicitly in Goulder's presentation, for the unity of agency occurred in history, thereby expressing something of the potential of the historical process.

21. See Friedrich D. E. Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1928), esp. 377–475.

## Results of Christology: Low and High

The infamous distinction between low and high christologies describes the final result of an act of christological construction. The low-high distinction is thoroughly vague, however, as it is drawn differently in different situations. As a result, it rarely finds its way into print—it is absent, for example, from the major christological surveys of the past few years—though it is common enough in conversations among some theologians.<sup>22</sup> Though there was some vagueness in the other christological distinctions discussed so far, at least reasonably precise specification of the relevant terms was possible. It is doubtful whether the same precision can be achieved in this case without gross arbitrariness. We must be content, therefore, with setting a rough semantic boundary between the two terms rather than overoptimistically specifying their precise meanings.

To that end, we may suppose that a low christology, in the most general terms, is one that denies the true divinity of Jesus Christ. Correspondingly, a high christology is one that affirms the true divinity of Jesus.<sup>23</sup> Here, already, we are faced with the obvious problem that the meaning of true divinity is unstated in these definitions. The former term is almost always used in polemical contexts and in derogatory fashion, as if the very phrase “low christology” was oxymoronic and every supposedly low christology fatally flawed.<sup>24</sup> There is therefore a difference between christologies that are charged with being low and those whose authors would be willing to accept this charge.

The vagueness in the definition of “low” christology is, of course, essential to its effectiveness as a slur, and defamation is its main use, so trying to

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22. Edward Krasevac refers to the terms in “‘Christology from Above’ and ‘Christology from Below,’” *Thomist* 51, no. 2 (April 1987): 299–306. Krasevac argues that the identification of “from above” with “high” and “from below” with “low” is a mistake, on the grounds that the first term of each pair refers to a starting point and a method, whereas the second term of each pair refers to a result. The article presumes that the terms are conflated in the “polemical contexts” (299) that are the occasion for their most common use. Krasevac’s point is well taken and is in substantial agreement with the elaboration of these distinctions here, though it overestimates the role of the “from below” and “from above” strategies to function as a methodological principle in addition to a starting point. As Krasevac himself notes, a christology may begin from below but stop before it reaches the proper goal of a “high Christology” (305); in this case, the “from below” designation refers only to a starting point and not to a guiding method. A more complete presentation would have to make room for what are called here christological schemas: these are the true origins of christological methods, and there are more than just the two Krasevac accepts. Here then is another example of the dangers imminent when failing to distinguish between christological starting points and schemas for the elaboration of a christology.

23. *Ibid.*, 299, 305.

24. The term “high” appears in George H. William’s foreword to Prescott Browning Wintersteen, *Christology in American Unitarianism* (Boston: Unitarian Universalist Christian Fellowship, 1977), in such a way as to imply that “low” would be used favorably, had it appeared in place of the chosen term, “devolving,” which is itself used approvingly.

sharpen the distinction is a hopeless task. Too much polemical water has flowed under the christological bridge to assign a clear, acceptable definition to low and high christologies. It may be time for theological conversation to follow the lead of most contemporary theological literature and stop using the terms.

### Results of Christology: Literally and Figuratively Incarnational

It is strange that there are so few distinctions in currency bearing on the results of christology in the way that the vague and inflammatory low-high pair does. Perhaps new terminology for describing final results would be useful, especially if it did so in precise, judicious fashion. Two modern christological debates suggest such distinctions.

The first is the debate over whether the term “Incarnation” should apply to Jesus Christ literally. It is hard even to raise this question for christologies in the functional style (see above), but when christology is fleshed out ontologically the question is quite apt. The classical christological tradition has insisted on a literal Incarnation, implicitly in the ancient “truly divine, truly human” formula and explicitly in conciliar pronouncements, especially that of Chalcedon (451 CE). But contemporary theologians have pointed out that the “truly divine, truly human” formula does not *demand* an incarnational interpretation. Paul Tillich, for example, was at pains to criticize the supranaturalistic cast of the idea of Incarnation. But what, then, are the options?

John Hick has tried both to discredit the “truly divine, truly human” formula as more-misleading-than-helpful myth and to reinstate it as a legitimate metaphorical description of the significance of Jesus Christ. While Hick’s rhetorical strategy has changed from one approach to the other, he has consistently held that whenever “Incarnation” is applied literally to Jesus Christ, the resulting affirmation—that Jesus Christ is God incarnate—is false. Hick demonstrates that the denial of literal Incarnation can be accompanied by the rejection of Incarnation language altogether or by its preservation as a figure of speech. Among christologies that seek to maintain some claim on the classical heritage, therefore, we can helpfully distinguish between those that affirm the Incarnation literally (with the aid of some metaphysical scheme) and those that regard incarnational language as *only* figurative. Of course, there is also the outright rejection of all incarnational language in speaking of Jesus Christ; this view has no interest in maintaining continuity with the classical christological

tradition and instead branches out in a new direction, though not without inspiration from a few Christian theological resources.<sup>25</sup>

I think that a low-level allergy to metaphysics often accounts for why theologians such as Hick cannot imagine a metaphysical scheme in which Incarnation language is plausible. Such an allergy is understandable to the extent that metaphysical schemes supporting literal affirmation of the Incarnation have frequently carried a lot of peculiar baggage, from Jesus' supposed two wills to impenetrable redemptive transactions, and from exclusive understandings of salvation to eerily anthropocentric views of cosmic history. It is these less-desirable characteristics that Hick wishes to avoid, but not all Incarnation-friendly metaphysical schemes are plagued by them, so his rejection of literal Incarnation talk seems to miss the point.

### Results of Christology: Absolutist and Modest

The second debate is over the proposition that Jesus Christ is absolutely, universally, uniquely, unsurpassably significant for revelation and salvation. We can call this proposition the Absolutist Principle. The Absolutist Principle contends that every kind of meaning associated with revelation and salvation can be comprehended by and organized around the significance of the religious symbol of Jesus Christ. This ties all of cosmic history, every form of religious life in the universe, every religious tradition, and every form of revelation of the mysterious ground of all that is, to Jesus Christ in *essential* fashion and not merely by analogy or simile. This leads to what I think is at present the most useful distinction bearing on the final results of christology: absolutist christologies affirm the Absolutist Principle, while anti-absolutist or modest christologies reject it.<sup>26</sup> In other theological terms, modest christologies take very seriously the role of the Holy Spirit both within and beyond the scope of Jesus Christ's influence.

The distinction between absolutist and modest christologies cannot be assimilated to other distinctions. For instance, it does not correspond to the distinction between supernaturalist and naturalist worldviews: supernaturalist modest christologies have been common. It is a decidedly impartial supernaturalism that works with modest christologies, however—one that does not make use of what Ernst Troeltsch called the supernatural apologetic.

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25. The best example of this is Gordon D. Kaufman, *Jesus and Creativity* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006).

26. For a detailed presentation of this case, see Wesley J. Wildman, *Fidelity with Plausibility: Modest Christologies in Contemporary Theology* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1998).

which is the arbitrary limiting of supernatural evidences to a favored religious tradition.<sup>27</sup>

Moreover, the distinction between absolutist and modest christologies does not overlap with the distinctions already discussed. The descending and the ascending initial trajectories may be, and actually have been, taken by important representatives of both absolutist and modest christologies. The style of christology, be it historical or ideal, functional or ontological, cannot by itself determine whether that christology is absolutist or modest. And most modest christologies use incarnational language, some literally, some figuratively.

Furthermore, the low-high distinction cannot be construed in the same sense as the modest-absolutist one, because all absolutist and most modest christologies assert Jesus' true divinity. This merely defers the issue to the qualifier "true" in "true divinity," but then the low-high distinction is too coarse to be of any use in sorting that out. Perhaps the largest difference between the two distinctions is that modest christologies target the Absolutist Principle in thoroughly programmatic fashion and, by contrast, the attack of low christologies upon Jesus' divinity often seems arbitrary and metaphysically innocent. As a result, the distinction between modest and absolutist christologies is more nuanced and better suited for discussing the complex results of actual christologies.

With regard to christological schemas, both absolutist and modest christologies can be developed within each of anthropological, cosmological, world-historical, and dialectical schemas. A few unelaborated examples may help to make this clear for those familiar with contemporary christologies. Among contemporary anthropological christologies, John Macquarrie's and John Hick's are modest, and Karl Rahner's is absolutist. Among cosmological christologies, Raimundo Panikkar's and John Cobb's are modest, and Paul Tillich's is largely absolutist (though Tillich shifts ground on this question in *Systematic Theology*). Among world-historical christologies, those of Wolfhart Pannenberg and Jürgen Moltmann are absolutist, and, to my knowledge, modest alternatives have not yet been explored recently in a clear-cut way. Paul Tillich had elements of such a view deriving from his Schellingian sympathies, and Philip Hefner may be moving in this direction in his christological thought, on the basis of what seems to be a modification of Hegel's system in the direction of one according a less-decisive place to Jesus Christ (recalling

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27. See, for example, Ernest Troeltsch, *The Absoluteness of Christianity and the History of Religions* (Richmond, John Knox, 1971), esp. "Background of the Problem of the Absoluteness of Christianity," 45–61, and "Two Types of Absoluteness," 131–63.



David Strauss's 1835 *Life of Jesus*). When it comes to the rarer dialectical schema, the christologies of Emil Brunner and Karl Barth's *Church Dogmatics* are absolutist. Perhaps surprisingly, it turns out that the more radical christology of Barth's *Romans* has at least some modest elements, due especially to the particular way it isolates its christological claims from the actual life and personality of Jesus Christ.

Many christological projects of the last few decades can be understood as angling for modest christologies under different names and from different perspectives. Feminist christologies have frequently urged that the interpretation of human sexuality take seriously the maleness of Jesus without being infected by the normative overtones associated with what I am calling the Absolutist Principle. Liberation theology, ecological theology, and other ethically pointed theological approaches have a valuable partner in modest christologies because the ethical decentering such theologies require is implied by the theological decentering induced by rejection of the Absolutist Principle. This avoids having to rely on the desperately weak argument that "Absolutist Christology is false because it has ethically undesirable consequences."<sup>28</sup> Perhaps most important, what I am calling modest christologies are prized by many of the theologians who grapple with what the natural and social sciences have discovered in the last two centuries or so about the cosmos, the biological basis of life, the nature of human groups, and the human psyche. By contrast with the jarring Absolutist Principle, there is much greater consonance between modest christologies and all these compelling spheres of discovery.

In all, the distinction between absolutist and modest christologies draws attention to one of the central fault lines in contemporary Christian theology that no other extant distinction captures. This is reason enough to expand the mass of extant christological distinctions with yet another one. The distinction between absolutist and anti-absolutist or modest christologies figures in many current theological debates, and the terminology would be immediately helpful in bringing clarity to the contested issues.

### Conclusion: Against Absolutism in Christology

In concluding this essay, I move from surveying christological distinctions to offering an argument on behalf of modest christologies and against absolutism

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28. This argument appears, for example, in Tom Driver, *Christ in a Changing World: Toward an Ethical Christology* (New York: Crossroad, 1981).

in christologies, in the specific sense of the Absolutist Principle. The point of a good distinction is not merely to classify but to enhance understanding, to clarify the force of argumentation, and to solve problems. The distinction between modest and absolutist christologies is just what is needed to solve a confusing problem in contemporary christology. The problem is this: How is the classical christological tradition to be continued in our era? The hallmark of that tradition—the “truly divine, truly human” formula—has become a sore point. Affirming it in conjunction with the Absolutist Principle has required theology to pay a high price in plausibility, forcing a contraction of the sphere of theological discourse away from domains in which absolutist versions of the classical affirmation seem hopelessly out of place and devoid of useful application.

The solution made articulable by the distinction between absolutist and modest christologies is this: modest christologies represent the most faithful, plausible, ethically adequate continuation of the classical christological tradition in our time, whereas absolutist christologies interfere with the triple demand of the classical tradition to maintain fidelity, plausibility, and ethical responsiveness. The argument for this is complex, obviously, but it can be briefly sketched here, in four phases.

First, with regard to historical interpretation, the primary argument is that the Absolutist Principle is a hermeneutical distortion of classical christology. The origins of the Absolutist Principle are understandable, as Christians sought to account for their powerful experiences of salvation in Jesus Christ. Nevertheless, there were never any compelling reasons for absolutizing the interpretation of those transformative experiences. The significance of Jesus Christ could be adequately and accurately expressed without the aid of the Absolutist Principle. Its intimation in the creeds is an accompaniment of the main intention of their framers, which was to testify to the importance of Jesus Christ and to hold off views of Jesus Christ from competitors such as Arius, who incidentally also assumed the Absolutist Principle. In this way, absolutist approaches to christology silently gained inappropriately normative status riding on the coattails of the normative solidification of the classical christology itself. The Absolutist Principle was a relatively unobtrusive distortion for many centuries, not least because neither the understanding of the cosmos nor the detailed knowledge of other religious traditions was such as to draw attention to the Absolutist Principle as an undesirable accretion. Those conditions for its invisibility have broken down, however, and the hermeneutical distortion of the absolutist christologies is now plain to see. From this point of view, modest christologies (themselves diverse, with both incarnational and inspira-

tional versions and with supernaturalist and naturalist versions) mark out what the classical christological tradition stands for when *not* distorted by the Absolutist Principle.

Second, with regard to ethical matters, the theoretical near invisibility of the Absolutist Principle and its casually assumed normativity expresses its potential power as a presupposition of Christian ethics. The famous objections leveled against the ethical downside of ecclesial history have often found their ultimate target in the absolutist tendencies of the church's christological reflection, especially in recent years as the difficulty of articulating a classical christology plausibly has become more evident.<sup>29</sup> Modest christologies offer a way forward in this ethically controverted situation by expressing the heart of the classical tradition while disassociating the christological interpretation from the ethically suspicious distortions of the Absolutist Principle.

Third, with regard to plausibility, modest christologies have tremendous advantages over their absolutist counterparts because they are not required to adopt the view that cosmic history and religious insight reach their culmination in the figure of Jesus and in his reception as the Christ. This is the ultimate source of the implausible anthropocentrism embraced by absolutist christologies.<sup>30</sup> The fragility induced by this implausibility is the main difficulty of continuing to affirm the Absolutist Principle in our time. It is enough for christology to express the significance of this figure as truly divine and truly human, as the means by which anyone may engage the great divine mystery of our existence and as the source of Christians' entry into the divine mission. Proponents of absolutist christologies are not content with this, however, and continue to urge that Jesus Christ is the all-determining reality, contrasting their focus on the absolute significance of the historical figure of Jesus with modest christologies, which hold that the Logos is the all-determining reality.

Finally, with regard to fidelity, it must be said that the classical christological tradition enjoins its supporters to make clear the evangelical significance of the gospel of Jesus Christ, which has always included making plausible representations of it in broadly intersubjective contexts. Modest christologies have significant advantages in relation to evangelical and apologetic forcefulness,

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29. For example, in relation to the role of christological absolutism in Jewish-Christian relations, see Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Faith and Fratricide: The Theological Roots of Anti-Semitism* (New York: Seabury, 1974).

30. Examples of deep distress over this implausibility in relation to the age and size of the universe are Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 2 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), 95–96; and Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity* (New York: Crossroad, 1987).

because they do not need to contend with a hermeneutical distortion of the classical tradition. Likewise, modest christologies have the capacity to foster ecclesial cohesion in a literate, culturally aware, and scientifically informed social environment, whereas absolutist christologies demand that the church—casually, or in a fit of prophetic pique—minimize much that human beings have discovered about the world in the last few centuries. Above all, fidelity to the classical christological tradition demands poised and plausible expressions of the significance of Jesus Christ that do justice both to the classical affirmation that Jesus Christ is “truly divine and truly human” and to what is known about the world in which the gospel of Christ must be proclaimed. Christologies can do that better when unencumbered by the Absolutist Principle.



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