

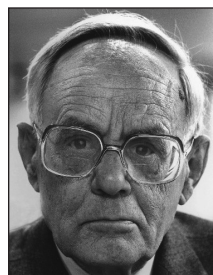
CHAPTER 1



Jesus as Revealer

Karl Rahner,
Dorothee Soelle,
Roger Haight

As Western societies became increasingly secularized in the twentieth century, the existence of God ceased to be a basic assumption for many people. Experiences of the absence or “eclipse” of God became an important theme in Western thought.¹ This was partly caused by a major change in the way reality was viewed in Western societies.² In the premodern thought of Plato and Aristotle, Augustine, Julian of Norwich, and Aquinas, the world was seen as existing within a transcendent framework of meaning. It was in relation to transcendent reality that human life found its meaning and could find fulfillment. This view of the world came to be replaced in Western societies by another, in which reality is seen in an immanent framework with no intrinsic reference to any transcendent reality. In the dominant ethos of Western modernity, the world and humanity are seen as self-sufficient and comprehensible without reference to God. Here, life is conducted and found meaningful according to what can be calculated and planned. In this modern worldview, religion has an ambivalent place. It can be useful for moral instruction, character formation, and as an aid to social order. But it isn’t necessary as such and it can give rise to violence and impede social progress.



This new immanent worldview and the secular societies and lifestyles based on it helped give rise to a sense of separation from God that was not addressed by models of the atonement focused on how Jesus relieves one of guilt, strengthens one against moral weakness, or gives hope that counters fear of death. In this context of secular modern societies, the understanding that Jesus saves by revealing the presence and loving nature of God took on renewed relevance.

What follows will examine this as presented in the Christologies of Karl Rahner, Dorothee Soelle, and Roger Haight. The theologies and Christologies that these three produced are very different. Karl Rahner tended to write in a dense style, and was intent on showing how the Christian faith and being Roman Catholic were comprehensible in relation to the dominant forms of knowledge and experience in modern Western societies. He helped stimulate the renewal of trinitarian theology in the twentieth century and was concerned that theology be both continuous with church tradition and meaningful in the present. Dorothee Soelle wrote in a brief, accessible style that focused on the meaningfulness of Jesus in relation to contemporary experiences of the absence of God, injustice, sorrow, joy, and desire. Her theology draws on contemporary drama, literature, art, and her own experiences as much as church tradition. Her thought was immensely popular in peace and justice movements with church affiliations. Roger Haight is a contemporary revisionist Roman Catholic working in the United States, who seeks to show how Christian faith can be understood in what is now a postmodern era. He writes in an accessible style and works in an ecumenical context. Different as their theologies are, they share an emphasis on a particular way of understanding Jesus' saving significance in relation to modern experiences of the absence of God.

The way in which these three see Jesus overcoming the experience of God's absence is illustrated in the musical *The Music Man*. In this drama, a fraudulent traveling salesperson comes into a community and transforms it by revealing something that was present there all along but which its members had been unaware of. Through their encounter with him, the lives of many community members become filled with a new sense of purpose and joy. The potential for this had always been present. But it was not actualized until he disclosed it. A woman in the community describes the salesperson's effect on her in the song entitled "Till There Was You."

There were bells on the hill
But I never heard them ringing,
No, I never heard them at all
Till there was you.

There were birds in the sky
But I never saw them winging
No, I never saw them at all
Till there was you.

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There was love all around
But I never heard it singing
No, I never heard it at all
Till there was you!³

Rahner, Soelle, and Haight do not see Jesus as a fraudulent traveling salesperson, but each understands him as having saving significance in a similar way. In their Christologies, the main evil that people need to be delivered from is a lack of awareness of God's presence. Jesus saves by making God powerfully present through his life, death, and resurrection. Though God is always present, Jesus gives people a new consciousness of this through the disclosive power of his person. In the encounter with him, a new awareness of God's nearness and love is made available that empowers people to further express God's love in their own lives. Though the Christologies of Rahner, Soelle, and Haight are multifaceted and have significant differences, central to each is a focus on how Jesus is preeminently the revealer of God.

Karl Rahner

Karl Rahner was born in Freiburg, Germany, on March 5, 1904.⁴ He grew up there and in 1922 followed his older brother Hugo in joining the Jesuit religious order. His theological studies began in 1929 in Holland. In 1933 he was sent to study philosophy at Freiburg. The philosopher Martin Heidegger was there, and Rahner participated in his seminar.⁵ However, he had to work under Martin Honecker. In some respects, this did not go well. Rahner's thesis attempted a modern reinterpretation of Aquinas's metaphysics of human knowledge.⁶ Honecker judged it unacceptable. Rahner published it anyway as *Spirit in the World*.⁷ Along with his subsequent *Hearers of the Word*,⁸ this provided

the theoretical basis for his theology, as he went on to become one of the most influential Roman Catholic theologians of the twentieth century. Rahner taught at the University of Innsbruck from 1937 to 1964. He retired in 1971 but remained active as a theologian until his death in 1984. His theology continues to be influential in Roman Catholic and ecumenical theology.

Rahner's thought was developed primarily in relation to tensions between Roman Catholic teaching and modern Western society. His theological studies occurred when the mood in Roman Catholic and Protestant theology in Europe "was one of reaffirmation in the face of the challenges of modernity."⁹ Along with others, he sought to build a bridge between Roman Catholic teaching and forms of thought and experience characteristic of Western modernity by showing how these were compatible when correctly understood. Rahner's thought has a circular dynamic.¹⁰ It began out of his own experience of Jesus mediating the presence of God through the worship of the church and its sacraments. He experienced and accepted church teaching about Jesus Christ as true. The question was, how should this be understood in twentieth-century Western society?¹¹ His Christology developed in answer to this question.

When Rahner began his theological studies, the dominant view of reality in modern Western thought was that it was a closed nexus of cause and effect. This meant that accounts of miracles, including Jesus' resurrection and much church teaching, seemed to express myths from a bygone age rather than truth one could live by. This conflict between the modern Western worldview and traditional Roman Catholic teaching was creating a pastoral crisis within the Roman Catholic Church in the North Atlantic hemisphere and preventing the church there from effectively communicating its message. Coupled with this, and equally important as challenges to Christian thought, were the explosion of knowledge and the cultural pluralism confronting the Roman Catholic Church as a worldwide institution.¹²

The scholastic approach to theology that preceded Rahner had positioned theology as the queen of the sciences, giving unity to the many different forms of knowledge. Rahner judged that theology could no longer proceed in this way. In the new context of Western modernity, there was simply too much for any one person to know, and the accepted results of various disciplines were now changing too quickly to form a basis from which to interpret the gospel. He responded by

instead developing an approach to theology that came to be known as transcendental Thomism.¹³ This involved interpreting the truth claims of theology less in relation to *what* people know and more in relation to *how* they know it and *who* they are as people seeking knowledge about themselves and their world.¹⁴

According to Rahner, when one asks what it means to know something and why one seeks to know it, one transcends the questions characteristic of any one area of study and moves from considering finite or conditioned aspects of existence to contemplating one's relationship to the infinite or unconditioned, which is the final horizon of all human knowing and acting.¹⁵ Moving in this way from asking about aspects of one's being to asking about one's being as a whole, one discovers that an unconditioned mysterious horizon of being—meaning and mystery—is implicitly present in all aspects of life and thought.¹⁶ To be a person is to be positioned between the world of finite realities and an unconditioned horizon of being, and to be oriented toward the latter in search for meaning.¹⁷ According to Rahner, it is only in relation to this that people can gain the unconditioned meaning and affirmation they seek. Salvation is in essence a matter of receiving an affirmation of ultimate meaning from this mysterious horizon, which Christians know as God.¹⁸ This understanding of the person that Rahner developed in his early works laid the basis for his attempt to overcome the conceptual impediments to Christian faith in Western modernity.

Rahner developed his Christology in two stages, though always on the basis of church teaching, particularly as found in the Chalcedonian Definition and the understanding of the person outlined above. For Rahner, Jesus was what the Chalcedonian Definition affirmed him to be, fully human and fully divine, the two natures united in his one person. As such, he is the culmination of God's revelation in history, the irrevocable and unsurpassable expression of God's Word of acceptance to humanity. The revelation of God in history culminates in Jesus, as the Second Person of the Trinity became incarnate in him. In the first part of his career, Rahner developed his Christology along these lines, and this continued to be the basis for his understanding of Jesus' saving significance.

In the 1960s, Rahner began developing a complementary way of understanding Jesus, arguing that in order for Christology to be believable in Western modernity, it must be free of any "mythology impossible to accept nowadays."¹⁹ For Rahner, this meant that the incarnation

must be intelligible as an event that did not violate the created order. The Chalcedonian affirmation that Jesus was fully human must be honored as much as the affirmation that he was fully divine. Accordingly, Rahner began to develop a Christology from below to match his previously worked-out Christology from above. In his earlier Logos Christology, or Christology from above, Rahner sought to show how Jesus was God's final Word who disclosed God's gracious presence in a definitive way. In his subsequent Christology from below, he sought to show how this was compatible with a modern understanding of Jesus as a human being.

Rahner did this by arguing that the incarnation occurred through the response of Jesus to the self-communication of the Logos, the Second Person of the Trinity. What is central and redemptive about Jesus is his being the one who fully said yes to God and in whom God said yes to humanity, once and for all. In saying yes to God in this way, Jesus actualized a potential that is in principle present in every person, and he culminated a history of salvation that Rahner argued can be understood as fitting with an evolutionary worldview. Jesus accepted God's self-communication to him supremely by dying in obedience and trust in God. As Jesus did this, God said yes to him in the resurrection, and Jesus became the incarnate expression of God's Word.

For Rahner, the resurrection is not so much subsequent to Jesus' death as included in it as God's affirmation of the trust and obedience that Jesus showed God in his death.²⁰ The temporal sequence of these events is less important than the intrinsic relationship they exemplify between the initiative of God's Logos and the obedient response of Jesus to this that was constantly taking place in his person. Through this interplay between divine initiative and Jesus' response, Jesus' human nature and the divine Logos became one in his person while retaining their distinctiveness, and Jesus became God's definitive self-communication to the rest of humanity. This becoming one of divine and human natures in Jesus, or incarnation, was an ongoing process that reached its decisive culmination in Jesus' death and resurrection, just as the history of God's self-communication to humanity reached its decisive culmination in Jesus' person. By the divine and human natures becoming one in him while remaining distinct, Jesus effected salvation for all humanity.

This understanding of the hypostatic union that constitutes Jesus' person is the linchpin of Rahner's understanding of Jesus' saving significance. Yet precisely here there is a major tension in his Christology.

In attempting to avoid what he describes as a mythological view of the incarnation, Rahner interpreted the Chalcedonian Definition in such a way that the unity of Jesus' person is found in the interaction between Jesus as a human being and the divine initiative of God's Logos to him. As a result, "there seem to be two free, conscious, subjects in Jesus,"²¹ the divine Logos and the human subjectivity of Jesus. Rahner might reply that every person is formed through the interplay of God's self-communication and their response to this. Then the question might be, does this conception of the incarnation do justice to the unity that Chalcedon affirmed between the divine and human natures in Jesus' person?

According to Rahner, this unity does not equal identity.²² The divine and human natures are united in Jesus' person, but they remain distinct. The Logos of God is united with Jesus' humanity, but it does not become one in the sense of being identical with it. This unity is such that Jesus' humanity becomes God's own by God having accepted it as such.²³ But an element of distinction between the two remains. Rahner sees this unity as bringing something new to God, so that here God, "who is not subject to change in himself," became "subject to change in something else."²⁴ Yet Rahner's description of this change remained vague.²⁵ His position seems to be that through a self-communication on God's part and a reciprocal self-giving and emptying on Jesus' part in response, God's Logos became expressed in the person of Jesus in an irrevocable and unsurpassable way.²⁶ God "became" here in that God's self-communication to the world, which is always God's gift of God's self, reached its definitive expression in Jesus' person. But this change happened in Jesus' person, not in the divine Logos. The Second Person of the Trinity, the divine Logos, "became" in Jesus but not in itself, and so divine immutability remains intact. So Rahner can say that on the cross Jesus' humanity suffered, but the Second Person of the Trinity did not. The divine remains impassible. It can "undergo no such historicity nor any 'obedience unto death.'"²⁷ Here Rahner wrestles with one of the central and enduring mysteries of the Christian faith.

In developing his position, Rahner attempts to hold together and exploit the soteriological implications of the emphasis in Alexandrian Christology that in the incarnation the divine Logos assumed human nature, and the concern of Antiochean Christology to affirm the integrity of Jesus' humanity and the reality of his human experience. It can be argued from an Alexandrian perspective that there is a significant

difference between what Rahner is saying and what Chalcedon affirmed. The understanding of divine nature employed at Chalcedon affirmed God to be impassible, as Rahner does. But the patristic principle that the “unassumed is the unhealed,”²⁸ which led to the doctrinal developments of Nicaea and Chalcedon and which is essential to Rahner’s understanding of Jesus’ saving significance, can be seen as requiring a deeper involvement of God in history than Rahner’s description of the union of divine and human natures in Jesus’ person acknowledges. Following this line of thought, the hypostatic union adopted at Chalcedon states that in Jesus, the Second Person of the Trinity entered history in a way²⁹ that Rahner was not willing to admit. Rahner would probably describe this way of understanding the incarnation as mythological. There is a tension here in Rahner’s thought as he tries to affirm a genuine unity between divine and human natures in Jesus’ person, the integrity of each, and the impassibility of the divine.

This tension in Rahner’s understanding of the incarnation reflects a constant oscillation running through his thought between the transcendent initiative of God and the finite response of humanity.³⁰ For Rahner, the former always precedes the latter and makes it possible, while the latter completes the former. For instance, Rahner describes Jesus’ resurrection as God’s affirmation of Jesus as the Christ, and as such, the irrevocable and unsurpassable expression of God’s gracious acceptance of humanity. But for Rahner, the resurrection would be incomplete without its believing reception and continued proclamation by the church. Jesus would not be truly risen without this human response to his resurrection. In turn, this response is always inspired by God’s prevenient grace. What makes Jesus the Christ is the perfection of this pattern of initiative and response between God and humanity in Jesus’ person. It is through God’s initiative and Jesus’ response that the hypostatic union in Jesus’ person occurs, by which salvation is effected.

How does Jesus effect salvation? As people are oriented toward the divine mystery, seeking and needing a final and definitive validation from it in order to find fulfillment and meaning in life, Jesus saves by disclosing this through his person. Jesus is “the self-revelation of God through who he is.”³¹ He is the messenger whose person is his message, who brings God’s grace-filled self-communication to the world through realizing in himself God’s saving will toward humanity. As this happens in him, God’s saving will and presence are revealed and made known to people in a new and definitive way. Thus for Rahner, and in

this model of the atonement generally, Jesus' person and work are one and the same. By being the person who fully accepts and responds to God's gracious self-communication in trust and obedience, Jesus is the definitive revelation of God. The definitive expression of God's gracious will and presence happens in Jesus' resurrection. Here the final horizon, toward which all life is destined, is revealed.

As the irrevocable and unsurpassable word of God, Jesus completes the history of revelation and the history of human seeking for God simultaneously. Jesus does not change God, God's will, or the structures of human existence. The atonement happens through the coming into being and existence of his person, which culminates in his death and resurrection. Jesus' work, according to Rahner, is simply to reveal God in a new and definitive way. What he reveals was always/already present³² and accessible to a certain extent through other means. God is the gracious presence, the infinite love from which humanity can never be fully separated. What Jesus changes is the degree to which God's presence is revealed in history.³³ Through his person, he makes God present in a way continuous with God's presence in all times and places, and yet new in its disclosive power. The life, death, and resurrection of Jesus dispel any ambiguity about the nature of God and human destiny. The love of God that he reveals includes by its very nature forgiveness of sin. His resurrection discloses the ultimate power of God's love and thus the hope of eternal life. Through his own response of trust and obedience to God, Jesus gives a new expression to God's nearness and love and so has a transformative effect on human life.

Rahner gives a strong ethical dimension to this. In accepting Jesus as the Christ, God has accepted all humanity into God's life, thus revealing that God is present in every person, as Jesus teaches in Matthew 25. Thus, love for God is love for one's neighbor, and vice versa.³⁴ This emphasis of Rahner's was particularly important for liberation theology.

Rahner does have a second, related understanding of how Jesus saves. His first, outlined above, depends on people encountering the proclamation of Jesus as the Christ and acknowledging it as such. Here the saving significance of Jesus occurs through his effect on people's consciousness. But following the thought line of Alexandrian Christology, Rahner also argues that, as Jesus' human nature has been accepted by God as God's own in the incarnation, this acceptance by God of one part of the total mass of created reality has a saving significance for the whole, as what happens to any one part affects all of the rest.³⁵ In accepting the person

of Jesus, God symbolically accepts the whole of created reality, thus bestowing salvation on all of it.³⁶ Rahner repeatedly asserts this without ever explaining how it takes effect. However, this argument reveals an important characteristic of his thought.

In his writings on the new situation of the church signaled by Vatican II, and in his call for theology to divest itself of mythological understandings of Jesus that impede Christian faith in the modern world, Rahner showed attentiveness to historical changes and differences. But when it came to understanding Jesus' saving significance, Rahner preferred to think, as he does in the argument above, in terms of ontological principles and categories, with less regard for historical differences. Rahner tended to analyze societies in organic terms, as wholes, of which each individual is an essentially similar part. The determinative issue for Rahner tended to be not where people are located within the larger whole, or the differences separating them within it, but simply whether they are in some way a part of it or not. He did not balance this organic analysis with equal attention to the location of Jesus in the social conflicts of his time or that of people in the social conflicts of the present. In discussing Jesus' saving significance, he did not attend much to differences in life situation between the rich and the poor, and how Jesus might have a saving significance for one different from his saving significance for the other. As a result, in this regard, Rahner's understanding of Jesus' saving significance tends to be historically abstract.³⁷

An important criticism related to this is that, in this abstractness, Rahner's theology related the Christian message primarily to the concerns of relatively privileged people in the North Atlantic hemisphere, those affected by secularism "and the criticisms of the Enlightenment," and paid little attention to the questions and concerns of "nonpersons," the victims of history whose sufferings often result from the former's privilege.³⁸ Rahner's understanding that through Jesus Christ God is encountered in the neighbor, so that love of God and love of neighbor coalesce, was a great stimulus for liberation and political theologies. But these in turn were sharply critical of the lack of attention to differences in the historical situations of the rich and poor in his thought. In keeping with this, Rahner's Christology shows little attention to Jesus' death as the execution of a prophet who spoke for justice and peace. Rahner's emphasis on how Jesus' resurrection is intrinsic to his death overlooks how it is an interruption of a reign of terror. We find a very different orientation to social divisions, and

the location of Jesus within them, in the Christology of Dorothee Soelle, who understood Jesus' saving significance in a similar way.

Dorothee Soelle

Dorothee Soelle was born in Cologne, Germany, in 1929, to a family that was politically aware, resistant to Nazism, and disengaged from institutional Protestantism. In high school she became fascinated by the Christianity of one of her religion teachers, who helped awaken in her an attraction to Jesus.³⁹ After studying "philology, German and philosophy in Cologne and Freiburg, and then theology and literature in Göttingen,"⁴⁰ she became a school teacher. She and her first husband had four children before divorcing. She later married Fulbert Steffensky, with whom she participated in the political evensong worship services in Cologne from 1968 to 1972.⁴¹ She was never offered a teaching position in theology in Germany, but she taught at Union Theological Seminary in New York from 1975 to 1987. She traveled extensively through Latin America and developed an international reputation through her speaking and writing. She was a leading representative with Jürgen Moltmann and Johann Baptist Metz of German political theology, which she later described as transitional to liberation theology.⁴² Soelle died of a heart attack on April 27, 2003.

The initial backdrop for her theology was the economic miracle of post-World War II Germany. Like Rahner, she accepted that the modern Western worldview meant that biblical accounts of miracles could no longer be accepted at face value.⁴³ However, she never sought to demonstrate that Christian faith is essentially compatible with the guiding ideas and ethos of modern Western societies. Her approach was always much more dialectical in this regard than Rahner's. She acknowledged that modern Western science and technology have benefited humanity in many ways,⁴⁴ and she had a lasting love for many aspects of Western culture. But she saw that the disenchanting effects of secularization had been detrimental to human life on a spiritual level, and she came to see the teachings and life of Jesus as deeply antithetical to Western capitalism, militarism, and empire building. She emphasized the critical relationship of Christian faith to the ethos of modern Western societies more than its compatibility.

Soelle's Christology developed in three stages,⁴⁵ in step with her growing critique of Western capitalism. The first stage was an early

uncritical belief in an omnipotent God, which she abandoned before entering university. In the second stage, which marked the beginning of her work as a productive theologian, she argued that the pervasive influence of modern technology and mass production in Western societies had deadened people to values of community, love, and companionship, and so had reduced human life.⁴⁶ Life had become homogenized by modern technologies and bureaucracies, so that people only existed among things, without authentic human relationships. Soelle described this as a kind of spiritual death⁴⁷ or inner emptiness,⁴⁸ from which people needed to be delivered. In her third stage, beginning in the 1970s, her critique of Western societies deepened as she encountered her guilt as a German citizen in relation to the Holocaust and third-world critiques of Western capitalism. She began to speak of Germany as “a land with a bloody history smelling of gas,” and of a “poverty without,”⁴⁹ afflicting many, particularly in the third world. For Soelle, the suffering from hunger, poverty, and oppression that the poor of the world endure is a result of greed, callousness, and apathy of the privileged. She judged this suffering to be a continuation of the Holocaust in a different form. The themes of her earlier theology continued in this third stage, so that her mature theology has a twofold focus of struggling against “emptiness within,” a life without loving relationships, and “poverty without,” resulting from injustice and oppression that robs people of the resources needed to live.⁵⁰ For Soelle, the two are related. The “emptiness within” of the privileged and powerful leads to a lack of love for others in need. To turn to one’s neighbor in need is to discover Christ in them, and in doing so, to have one’s inner emptiness filled.

The wellspring of Soelle’s theology was an eros for what she termed “identity”⁵¹ or “fullness of life,” a being at peace with God, oneself, and others. She experienced a constant yearning for this and found inspiration and a way toward it in Jesus, in his relationships to his followers, and in the reign of God he proclaimed. She experienced these as concrete utopias that continually attracted her, and she found in Jesus a spiritual resource that empowered her to try to live after his example in her own time. For Soelle, this fullness of life, or “identity” that she believed all people yearn for, is threatened internally and externally. It is threatened externally by oppression, which robs one of the means of sustaining life. For those who have adequate means of living, it is also threatened internally, by despair that a meaningful life is not possible or by fear of losing what we have and the temptation to seek comfort and ease rather than

richer relationships with one another. According to Soelle, people need religious language and rituals in order to articulate the value and possibility of a life rich in relationships and to be sustained in seeking it.⁵² Jesus saves by providing this kind of language, by disclosing the presence of God and this possibility, which then empowers people to actualize it.

On one level, Soelle's theology is a form of social moralism that seeks to bring "all experience and action under a pressure to change" toward an idealized state.⁵³ But beneath this, there is a mystical element in her thought, a love for Jesus, not simply for what he did and does, but for the beauty of who he was and what he represents. For Soelle, it is the beauty of Jesus' person, life, and relationships that makes him important for the present. Her theology is filled with a passion to connect with and participate in the love that she saw embodied in him. This passion went beyond moral terms. It found expression in her love of Bach, in her poetry, and in her aesthetic critique of inner emptiness as a sinful state of being.⁵⁴ For her, a life without loving relationships is wrong, not because it harms others, but because it wastes the gift, the opportunity to give and receive love, which God has given.

Soelle's Christology is more critical of Western societies than Rahner's. It is also more loosely bound to the church and its traditions.⁵⁵ She did not feel bound to produce a Christology consistent with the teaching of ecumenical councils like Nicaea and Chalcedon. Her Christology began with a negation of previous church teaching as outdated and often ethically unproductive. She first developed it as an exercise in theology after the death of God.⁵⁶ For her, this meant the death of religious tradition and church teaching as a binding authority. As a child of the Enlightenment, authority for her lay in her own experience and judgments. But Soelle affirmed certain aspects of church teaching and tradition as meaningful and warranting retrieval. She found here a language that helped her articulate what would otherwise be impossible to express.⁵⁷ The Bible; figures from church history like Francis of Assisi, Martin Luther King Jr., and Oscar Romero; and religious practices like those of the base communities in Latin America were a source of hope and joy to her. These helped verify Jesus as the Christ, and along with him, provided inspiration essential for struggling against despair brought on by "inner emptiness" or "outer poverty." Her Christology grew out of her own experience of Jesus disclosing to her the presence of God and the possibility of meaning and fulfillment through loving relationships and the struggle for peace and justice.

For Soelle, Jesus is the Christ as he changes people, moving them to express in their own lives the love and commitment to justice that he expressed in his.⁵⁸ She never sought to understand how he is able to do this, and so never developed an understanding of his person to undergird her understanding of his saving significance. Quoting Philipp Melanchthon, that “the important thing is to know Christ’s benefits, not his nature,”⁵⁹ she eschewed any metaphysics or discussions of the Trinity. As a result, her Christology is rather mute on how it is that Jesus is the Christ. For her, Jesus is risen only as he changes peoples’ consciousness and moves them to express in their own time and place the love of God that he embodied in his. Otherwise, he remains dead.⁶⁰ But while she was not interested in a metaphysical understanding of Jesus’ person, she was interested in historical criticism and the “history-like” accounts of Jesus that give concreteness to his teaching and relationships. These are crucial as a guard against idolatrous misappropriations or mystifications of Jesus’ message.⁶¹ For her, following Jesus meant entering into the historical conflicts of the present between rich and poor, against the arms race, or around the ecological crisis in a way congruent with the actions of Jesus in his time.

The Christology she developed in her first theological book, *Christ the Representative*, remained basic for all that came after. Here she argued that Jesus is the Christ as he represents God to people and people before God.⁶² At this point she used the term *identity* to describe the fulfillment that she believed people innately seek and that she saw represented in the symbol of the reign of God. According to her, a yearning for identity is innate in human nature. People can only experience this in relationships of love,⁶³ and they need to be empowered by something greater than themselves for this to happen. While a “yearning” for identity “is nourished by an innate knowledge” of it, “however fragmentary,” someone else must disclose to people the nature and possibility of the identity they seek.⁶⁴ This is the saving work of Jesus. He represents to people the realm or kingdom of identity that they yearn to reach.⁶⁵ By revealing its presence and possibility in his person and relationships, he inspires and awakens others to the possibility that they can experience it too. The beauty of what Jesus discloses generates an eros that can energize and move people to seek and experience it in their own lives. In one sense, Jesus does not bring anything new. “The freedom which dawned in him exists, of course, even where it does not appeal to him.”⁶⁶ Yet in another sense, Jesus is

unique in that, for Soelle, this freedom finds its decisive and definitive expression in his person.

Thus, in an era in which “God is dead” or God is experienced as absent, Jesus reveals that God is present by representing God to humanity. At the same time, he represents people to God. Jesus inspires in God a hope in humanity, that they might reach identity, parallel to the hope for identity that he inspires in humanity, so that God does not give up on humanity.⁶⁷ All this happens not through any particular act or teaching on Jesus’ part but through the sum total of his person and history. By the things he said and did, by his death and resurrection, Jesus reveals to people the possibility and beauty of a life rich in relationships of love. He enables people to see himself, the “Christ,” the possibility of such relationships, in the other people; “in the eyes of the street children in Bogota or the forsaken drinkers in our cities.”⁶⁸

As for Rahner, so for Soelle, the saving significance of Jesus lies in the new awareness of God’s nature and presence that he brings. Jesus changes the human condition in that he makes people aware of their alienation and of the possibility of experiencing something more meaningful.⁶⁹ For Soelle, Jesus’ saving power lies in the beauty of God’s love manifest in him, which moves people more than fear of torture and death or the temptations of apathy and greed. Jesus is risen inasmuch as the beauty of God’s love disclosed in him continues to move people after his death. The fulfillment of the possibility that he brings depends upon people’s free response to him. Without the human response of faith to the divine initiative in Jesus, Jesus would not be the Christ.⁷⁰

This understanding of Jesus as the Christ, developed in her first book, became more concrete in relation to social conflicts in her later writings. In *Christ the Representative*, apart from a brief discussion of Christian anti-Semitism, Soelle does not relate Jesus’ saving significance to justice issues. She simply describes how Jesus enables one to achieve identity in an era of conformity. In subsequent years, as her thought developed into its third stage, she began to locate Jesus concretely within struggles for justice and peace, describing him as “the poor man from Nazareth whom the Romans tortured to death.”⁷¹ At the same time the ethical content of her Christology blossomed. What she had earlier termed “identity” became peace and justice, including peace with creation. But Soelle’s Christology was never simply about ethics. It continued to have a mystical element of experiencing God in a neighbor, in moments of

sorrow and joy, of appreciating the beauty of being, manifest in human relationships and in nature.

There are ambivalences in Soelle's Christology. According to her, Christ discloses the possibility of achieving identity, but its actual achievement lies in the future. Soelle does not describe how this future might be finally achieved. For her, Christ provides a definitive expression of an ever-present reality and possibility. But the New Testament speaks of Christ as bringing more. His resurrection is not just the vindication of his cause and its continuation in the lives of his followers. It is also the establishment of a new reality that gives hope for the final overcoming of sin and death that people are able to participate in now through faith. Soelle does not see Jesus as making this kind of difference or bringing this kind of new reality.⁷² As a result, her understanding of the hope Christ brings remains ambiguous.

For Soelle, death is something to be both resisted and accepted.⁷³ Yet if it is something to be resisted, it must finally be overcome if identity is to be fully achieved.⁷⁴ She resists the idea of Christ bringing anything new into history. Yet the meaningfulness she ascribes to loving relationships depends upon the occurrence of a more far-reaching transformation of the human condition than she envisions. In this respect, Soelle's Christology is very romantic. Jesus' meaning as the Christ and the meaning of human life in general lie for her more in the struggle for identity, for peace and justice, than in achieving it. In her theology, the emptiness within or the deprivation and violence that threaten life from without are in some way necessary for life to have meaning, as this is only found in struggling against them. Identity thus becomes something always sought but never fully attained. The eschatological hope that Christ brings functions as a utopia in her thought, but the transcendence of God necessary to sustain the struggle for justice and peace is lacking. She tends to present the radical transcendence of God and genuine immanence as mutually exclusive.⁷⁵ Yet in the crucified and risen Christ, both are present. We turn now to the Christology of Roger Haight, who understands Jesus' saving significance in a similar way, only in a postmodern context.

Roger Haight

Rahner developed his Christology primarily in relation to the crisis of cognitive claims⁷⁶ brought on by the accomplishments of modernity.

Soelle developed hers more in relation to the negative aspects of modernity.⁷⁷ Haight utilizes the same understanding of Jesus' saving significance as these two, but in relation to the new cultural context of postmodernity.

Haight was born in 1936. He grew up in Caldwell, New Jersey, attending a parochial school run by Dominican Sisters and then Xavier High School in New York City, run by Jesuits. Upon graduating, he joined the Jesuit order. He studied at Berchmans College in the Philippines, then taught high school there for three years. He continued his education at Woodstock College in Maryland and then at the Divinity School of the University of Chicago, where he did a thesis on Roman Catholic Modernism directed by David Tracy. He has since taught at Jesuit graduate schools in Manila, Chicago, Toronto, and Cambridge, Massachusetts, and has been visiting professor in Lima, Nairobi, Paris, and Pune, India.⁷⁸ The Board of Trustees of the Baptist Theological Union named him the Chicago Divinity School's alumnus of the year for 2005.⁷⁹ He was also singled out for attention by the Vatican. While his book *Jesus, Symbol of God* won the Catholic Press Association's Book Award for Theology in 2000, in December of 2004, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith declared that it contained "erroneous assertions, the dissemination of which is of grave harm to the faithful."⁸⁰ He is currently visiting professor of systematic theology at Union Theological Seminary in New York City.

Haight develops his Christology in relation to the ethos, values, and ideas that he sees to be shared by educated people in the new context of postmodernity.⁸¹ He uses the term *postmodern* to refer both to the fragmented nature of the cultures of advanced industrial societies and an intellectual ethos or constellation of values and ideas characterized by the four attributes outlined below that has become predominant in them.⁸² He sees this new ethos and social reality of postmodernism presenting both challenge and opportunity to the church. The challenge is that the church must rethink its understanding of Jesus in order to credibly present the Christian message in this context. Haight likens this to the challenge the church faced in moving from being a sect within Judaism to becoming a Gentile religion in the cultural context of Hellenism. The opportunity is that now, as then, this challenge may lead to the development of Christologies that surpass previous formulations in certain respects.⁸³

Haight describes the ethos of educated people in postmodernity as shaped by four related characteristics.⁸⁴ The first is a sense of the

historical nature of reality: Everything is understood to be particular and contingent, to have evolved from something else and to be evolving into something different, though there is no discernible goal to this process. This historical consciousness requires that the legitimacy of christological claims be demonstrated through showing their continuity with what can be known historically about Jesus. It also gives rise to a sense of how ideas and values interact with social structures and how these are changeable through cooperative action. This historical consciousness underlies the second characteristic: a critical social consciousness, an awareness of how ideas and values are socially grounded, reflective of their time and place. This social consciousness is critical in that it is concerned about “massive social evil”⁸⁵ and seeks the creation of just social structures. As a result, the ability of a Christology to empower people to resist evil becomes one criteria of its adequacy.⁸⁶ This historical and critical social consciousness culminates in an awareness of the irreducible difference between various historical eras and religions, and a refusal to grant privilege to any one era or religion over another. This entails the loss of any sense of an “overarching framework” or perspective that can be claimed as true in opposition to all others.⁸⁷ The result is a pluralist consciousness that could give rise to a radical sense of relativism and the absence of any transcendent meaning in life. Haight gives it a slightly different interpretation. The challenge it presents is not to show that there is some transcendent meaning in life, as with Rahner, but rather to show that such a meaning can be discerned without it becoming a source of division and violence to others. Haight sees this to be the central challenge posed by postmodernity to contemporary Christologies.⁸⁸

Can one interpret Jesus Christ as precisely God’s story which is so open to others that it does not coopt their specific identity and does not privilege Christians over against them? Can christology represent a Jesus Christ who is not divisive, but who authorizes the other as other, and hence functions as a principle of unity that respects differences?⁸⁹

A fourth characteristic of this postmodern ethos is a cosmic consciousness, informed by the natural sciences and the environmental crisis, in which humanity is seen to be one small part of an unimaginably large and complex world. This cosmic consciousness creates a new sense of human unity that reinforces the central challenge of postmodernism outlined above.

We constitute a common humanity on this planet, indeed, a community, despite all the differences in religion and culture. We need a christology that will confirm the importance of a common humanity, a human community in a common habitat, and a shared process of nature of which all are a part, and at the same time respects human differences in this postmodern world.⁹⁰

All this renders many premodern and modern Christologies inadequate and ethically problematic. The challenge is to retrieve from them the basis for an understanding of Jesus that is intellectually credible, ethically empowering, and yet open to other faiths in a time when all great religious and moral visions are recognized to be potentially dangerous to others.

Like Rahner and unlike Soelle, Haight writes as a theologian rooted in the church and its teachings. Consequently, he argues that in addressing these contextual challenges, a contemporary Christology must demonstrate its continuity with the message and portrayal of Jesus in the New Testament and the affirmations of the Councils of Nicaea and Chalcedon, as these are part of the church's foundational understanding of Jesus Christ.⁹¹ For Haight, the classical Christologies of the past provide guidelines for the present. While they cannot be simply repeated, they remain important resources and provide internal criteria for contemporary Christologies.

Haight develops his Christology by first searching the New Testament for a commonality underlying its diverse understandings of Jesus as the Christ. He finds that all the Christologies of the New Testament understand Jesus as the bringer or mediator of God's salvation.⁹² Through his preaching, teaching, and healing, and through his exorcisms and table fellowship Jesus made God's saving power present in people's lives. In a later publication, he includes Jesus' death on the cross in this, arguing that Jesus' suffering on the cross was paradigmatic of the suffering caused by sin and evil. Jesus' resurrection revealed God's power to save even in relation to the radical evil exemplified here. It also validated his commitment to the reign of God as exemplary and destined to endure in life everlasting,⁹³ and so validated Jesus as revealing God's nature and presence through his ministry and message.

Haight also searches through the diverse classical Christologies found in the Christian theological tradition and finds that underlying each is

the idea that Jesus mediates God's salvation by making God present. By doing so, Jesus is "the concrete symbol of God," and the exemplar of what it means to be fully human.⁹⁴ Jesus saves by revealing God's nature and presence, thus overcoming the lack of awareness of this that alienates people from God.

By being a symbol of God, by mediating an encounter with God, Jesus reveals God as already present and active in human existence. Historically he does this both by being and by making God present in a thematic way through his words, actions, and whole person. Jesus reveals by causing in the persons who come to him in faith an analogous reflective awareness of the presence of God to them.⁹⁵

There are objective and subjective dimensions to this saving work. The objective dimension is Jesus' disclosure of God's gracious presence so that people become explicitly conscious of it. This makes possible the subjective dimension of people consciously participating in God's saving work by expressing in their own lives the same values of God's kingdom that Jesus expressed in his. Becoming more fully aware of God's nature and presence enables people to participate more fully in God's salvific work, so that they "contribute to the material of the final kingdom of God."⁹⁶ Jesus continues to be an effective symbol of God in the ongoing course of history through the church bearing witness to his person and work.

As the symbol of God, "Jesus is normative for the Christian imagination."⁹⁷ But within a postmodern consciousness of pluralism, this does not invalidate or denigrate other religions. The character of God as Spirit that Jesus reveals "may be conceived as the universal ground of salvation . . . also present in other religions and so normatively revealed in them as well."⁹⁸ Jesus as normative demands a recognition of other religions as means of grace, and warrants interreligious dialogue as a means of seeking self-transcendence for Christians and others. Such dialogue does not lead away from Christian faith, but toward an increased recognition of God's grace present in other religions, and to a deeper appreciation of God as revealed in Jesus.

Given that Jesus discloses God's presence and nature in a transforming and normative way, Haight argues that Jesus' person can be understood through either a Logos or a Spirit Christology.⁹⁹ A Logos, or

descending, Christology stresses the uniqueness and normativeness of Jesus and accounts for this by understanding him as the incarnation of God's Word. A Spirit Christology understands Jesus' saving significance to derive from the inspiration of the Holy Spirit and his response to it. It stresses his consubstantiality with other people, not his distinctiveness. Haight prefers the approach of a Spirit Christology, arguing that Jesus was able to make God present in a transformative way because "God as Spirit was present to Jesus in a superlative degree,"¹⁰⁰ to the extent that one can say, in keeping with the Councils of Nicaea and Chalcedon, that "Jesus was one human person with an integral human nature in whom not less than God, and thus a divine nature, is at work."¹⁰¹ As such, Jesus is for Christians the normative revelation of the one God, the loving creator of heaven and earth who is active in history in the Holy Spirit.

It is possible to understand Jesus as the Christ in this way, and this is in keeping with the teachings of the ecumenical councils of Nicaea and Chalcedon. This understanding has the merit of intelligibility in relation to the postmodern ethos Haight outlines, in that it does not envisage Jesus' incarnation in what Rahner might call a mythological way. But as with Rahner's Christology, one could argue that Haight's understanding of Jesus' person does not do full justice to the affirmation running through some New Testament traditions that in Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, the Second Person of the Trinity became present in history in a decisively new way. Haight argues that Jesus can only have a credible saving significance today if he is understood as a human being consubstantial with all others.¹⁰² But the New Testament and the Councils of Nicaea and Chalcedon also affirm that God became present in history in a new way in Jesus' person. Haight argues that positing a quantitative difference in the Spirit's inspiration of Jesus can account for this.¹⁰³ This additional inspiration of the Spirit enabled Jesus to be the Christ by actualizing the potential present in his human nature as such. But in some traditions of the New Testament, the claim is made that Jesus not only exemplified how human freedom can be fulfilled but, as the incarnation of God, created a new possibility for human fulfillment that did not exist before.¹⁰⁴ The basis for this was seen to lie in a qualitatively new act of God, which included but went beyond Jesus being inspired by the Spirit.¹⁰⁵ In Christ, the Logos, or Second Person of the Trinity, was incarnate in Jesus and experienced death on the cross.

When this way of understanding Jesus as the Christ becomes the starting point for understanding God in light of Jesus, it can lead to dramatic interpretations of the Trinity, as in the theology of Jürgen Moltmann. Haight insists that Jesus must be understood within a trinitarian perspective, as this is necessary to explain the Christian experience of salvation in him.¹⁰⁶ The experience of Jesus Christ is always an experience of Jesus and the Holy Spirit. It has a trinitarian structure. The Holy Spirit both inspires the person Jesus to a superlative degree and inspires the believer to receive him as the Christ. Haight also notes that the doctrine of the Trinity works two ways. It affirms that it is God who is encountered in Jesus and that “God really is in God’s self as God is revealed to be in God’s self-communication in Jesus and the Spirit.”¹⁰⁷ But in keeping with his preference for a Spirit Christology, Haight does not pursue a dramatic rethinking of the doctrine of God on the basis of Christology. He affirms instead a stance of theological humility. The revelation of God in Jesus is real, but it is a gift, primarily the gift of salvation. God remains incomprehensible mystery, genuinely encountered and known in Jesus and the Spirit, but always beyond human comprehension. Haight is concerned with how Jesus’ saving significance can be understood in continuity with Roman Catholic Church teaching in an intellectually credible way. Having understood what Jesus means for the Christian and the world in terms of the doctrine of the Trinity, he does not go on to ask, what does all this mean for God? His emphasis on Jesus’ saving significance and his sense of the mystery of God direct him away from this.

Haight’s Christology seems to support a reformist option in relation to the ills of society.¹⁰⁸ The development of his Christology in relation to the intellectual ethos of an educated postmodern elite reflects, in part, confidence in existing critical movements in society as the best hope for achieving a more just and sustainable society. It affirms many of the same values as Soelle’s, but when the two are juxtaposed, one does not find in Haight’s Christology the concrete and immediate identifications of Christ with the poor that Soelle insists on. Her Christology related to society in a more radical way, highlighting the gulf between current institutions, social practices and trends, and Jesus of Nazareth. Like Rahner, Haight interprets the ethical import of Jesus as commensurate with many of the guiding ideals of educated people in North Atlantic countries.

This points to an interesting contrast among the three Christologies studied in this chapter. All employ a similar understanding of Jesus’

saving significance, but they differ in where they seek to understand Jesus concretely. Rahner and Haight seek a metaphysical concreteness in their understandings of Jesus. They ask how Jesus is related to God, what enables him to disclose God's presence in the way that he does. These questions lead them to the doctrine of the Trinity. Soelle's Christology lacks this kind of understanding and remains metaphysically vague, but her Christology has a historical concreteness and radical edge in its ethical applications that theirs lack. Can her radical ethical stance be sustained without a sense of divine transcendence that the doctrine of the Trinity conceptualizes to back it up? But conversely, does the cross of Jesus not require a radical understanding of Jesus' presence in relation to contemporary North Atlantic societies?

Summary

The three authors studied in this chapter see the saving significance of Jesus to lie in the way he reveals God's nature and presence. Each sees the fundamental alienation separating people from God in modern or postmodern Western societies to be a lack of awareness of God. Each argues that this is partly caused by the clash between guiding assumptions of modern or postmodern Western cultures and premodern understandings of the Christian message. In these successive new cultural contexts, traditional notions of Jesus' person and work that have dominated Western Christianity in the past block the reception of the gospel more than they express it. Their meaning can only be retrieved by their message being recast in terms of the transformative power of Jesus' revelation of God.

Rahner, Soelle, and Haight are agreed that the alienation of being unaware of God's presence cannot be overcome by an understanding of his saving significance built around notions of his sacrificial death, his victory over sin and evil, or his moral example. Each sees that this alienation is overcome by the disclosure of God that occurs through his person. Through his ministry, death, and resurrection, Jesus reveals God's gracious presence to people. Like the traveling salesman in *The Music Man*, Jesus reveals something that was there all along, but which people are often unaware of. He makes a new awareness of God's presence and love available to people and so empowers them to express this in their own lives. This can be called the revelatory theory of the atonement. It attends to how Jesus addresses a particular form of

alienation from God that has become prominent in secularized Western societies.

One strength of this understanding of Jesus' saving significance is that in stressing that Jesus saves by revealing what is already everywhere present, it enables these Christologies to relate positively to other faiths in contexts where Christian communities must come to terms with the challenges of religious pluralism. Another strength of this understanding is that it does not directly clash with other forms of knowledge in Western cultures. Each of the three Christologies studied here seeks to show how one can belong to an educated Western elite and still confess Jesus as the Christ.

But with this apologetic also comes a sharp critique of certain assumptions about Western secularity. Though Rahner, Soelle, and Haight each affirms certain aspects of secularism, all reject the notion that religion is doomed to disappear from Western culture or that faith in Christ is necessarily intellectually incoherent and morally bankrupt. Each presents critical faith in Jesus Christ as a defensible position that can provide a vital contribution to contemporary Western public life. Each rejects the "immanent frame"¹⁰⁹ of secularized Western societies as sufficient for understanding and articulating the meaning of human life.

In the next chapter, we turn to three contemporary versions of the moral influence theory of the atonement. These also both accept and challenge the immanent frame of contemporary Western societies. As they do so, they invoke Christology to unleash a radical critique of the violence and injustice prevalent in North Atlantic cultures.

Suggestions for Further Reading

Haight, Roger, S.J. *The Future of Christology*. New York: Continuum, 2005. Most of Roger Haight's christological thinking is contained in his magnum opus, *Jesus, Symbol of God*. This smaller volume contains a number of essays in which he explores some issues further and interacts with the Christologies of others. It also contains a valuable chapter in which Roger responds to most of the major critiques and reviews of *Jesus, Symbol of God*.

Oliver, Dianne. "Christ in the World: The Christological Vision of Dorothee Soelle." In *The Theology of Dorothee Soelle*, ed. Sarah K.

- Pinnock. Harrisburg, Penn.: Trinity Press International, 2003. A good overview of Soelle's Christology and its development.
- Rahner, Karl. *Foundations of Christian Faith*. New York: Crossroad, 1978. See especially pages 176–321. Rahner's Christology developed over the years. This is his mature statement of it.
- . *The Love of Jesus and the Love of Neighbor*. New York: Crossroad, 1983. This is a late, very brief, yet very insightful and interesting writing of Rahner on Christology.
- Sienbenrock, Roman. "Christology." In *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Rahner*, ed. Declan Marmion and Mary Kines. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005. A succinct overview and assessment of Rahner's Christology and its development.
- Soelle, Dorothee. *Stations of the Cross: A Latin American Pilgrimage*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993.
- . *Theology for Skeptics: Reflections on God*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995. These two books contain arresting expressions of Soelle's later Christology.
- Wong, Joseph. *Logos-Symbol in the Christology of Karl Rahner*. Roma: LAS, 1984. Still the best overview and secondary source on Rahner's Christology.

Discussion Questions

1. How would you assess Rahner's success in developing a believable Christology for the twentieth century?
2. Is Soelle's socially and politically radical Christology an authentic expression of who Jesus Christ is today?
3. Does Haight's Christology adequately express the meaning of the affirmations of the Councils of Nicaea and Chalcedon in the present postmodern context?
4. Is the revelational understanding of Jesus' saving significance, that he saves by revealing God's loving presence, able to express all dimensions of Jesus' saving significance?