

## INTRODUCTION

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This book is an introduction to contemporary Christologies. It examines how fifteen theologians from the past forty years have understood Jesus. It is divided into five chapters, each focusing on a particular way of understanding Jesus' saving significance as featured in the Christologies of three theologians. These ways of understanding Jesus' saving significance are sometimes called models of atonement. Each chapter analyzes the form of evil, sin, or suffering that a particular model addresses, how Jesus is seen to overcome this, how salvation is understood in the model, and assesses the model's strengths, and weakness. The aim is to help students grasp the dynamics of different atonement models, their limitations, strengths, and versatility, and to provide samples of contemporary christological thought. The focus of the book is on the exposition of the Christologies studied. But questions, observations, and critical comments on these and the models of atonement they employ are scattered throughout, as critical debate belongs to the substance of theology. An introduction should give some assessment as well as an overview.

The Christologies studied here all belong to the post–World War II era and represent live options in contemporary Christian theology. They continue a tradition of thought going back almost two thousand years. The first Christologies arose in response to Jesus of Nazareth. The dates of his birth and death cannot be determined exactly. He was a Jew born in Palestine, probably in Nazareth, around 7 or 6 BCE.<sup>1</sup> Following in the footsteps of John the Baptist and after being baptized by John, he began an itinerant public ministry in Galilee, preaching the imminent coming of the reign of God, healing the sick, casting out demons, teaching, and gathering a following, at the heart of which were twelve disciples. After traveling to Jerusalem at the time of the Passover celebration, he was crucified by Roman authority, probably in 30 CE. Shortly thereafter, some of his former followers and others claimed that Jesus had risen to new life, proclaimed him to be the Christ, and began to worship God in his name.

Ever since then there have been Christologies reflecting on this. These typically have two foci. One is around Jesus' person. He was a

person like others and yet, as the Christ, was distinct in his relation to God.<sup>2</sup> Most contemporary Christologies continue the long tradition of trying to understand what this distinction was and how it came to be. The second focus of Christologies is on Jesus' work, or saving significance. Jesus was understood to be the Christ because he was seen to save or benefit people, delivering them from various forms of sin, evil, and suffering, empowering them to do the good either through his teaching, his example, his death and resurrection, or a combination thereof. Contemporary Christologies seek to articulate what Jesus' saving significance is in the present and how he effects it. These two foci are usually interrelated. Because Jesus is like others and yet distinct in relation to God, he is able to save.

Christologies tend to develop in relation to external factors like the social location of a church, the stability of surrounding society, and socially dominant ideals, assumptions, and practices. They also tend to reflect internal factors like the church tradition a theologian belongs to, theological developments and disputes within it, and the interests of those producing the Christology. These internal and external factors are usually related and yet cannot be collapsed into one another. In time, a combination of external factors like the church's growing presence in the Roman Empire and internal factors like the Arian crisis and later christological debates led to the affirmations of the ecumenical Councils of Nicaea (325) and Chalcedon (451). Their teachings, that Jesus Christ was one with and yet distinct from God (Nicaea), fully human and fully divine, the two natures united without confusion in his one person (Chalcedon), would become basic assumptions for most Christologies up until the time of the Enlightenment (1700s). They continue to be considered normative in the teachings of some churches. In the centuries between the Council of Chalcedon and the rise of the Enlightenment a variety of Christologies were produced that continue to be influential today, such as those of Anselm, Aquinas, Julian of Norwich, Luther, and Calvin.

The Enlightenment was characterized by a critical attitude toward Christian faith, church authority, and teaching. It was accompanied by spectacular developments in forms of knowledge like the natural sciences that often contradicted biblical traditions and church teaching. This helped create an intellectual ethos that challenged the authority of the affirmations of Nicaea and Chalcedon as basic assumptions for Christology and the veracity of biblical traditions about Jesus' birth,

miracles, and resurrection. A variety of distinctly modern Christologies developed in response to this, like those of Schleiermacher, Hegel, and Ritschl. Contemporary Christologies have developed in varying ways against this combined background of the biblical witness, the affirmations of Nicaea and Chalcedon, the challenge of the Enlightenment, and theological developments occurring over the course of church history.

Contemporary Christologies have also developed in relation to events in the twentieth century.<sup>3</sup> These sometimes influenced Christian theology in contrasting ways. The challenge of the Enlightenment has continued to confront Christian theology with a “crisis of cognitive claims”<sup>4</sup> regarding traditional affirmations about the person and work of Jesus Christ. With this came an increasing secularism in Europe that helped create a sense of the absence of God. The horrors of World War I contributed to this as well, yet also worked in a different direction, helping trigger the theological development of neoorthodoxy, which reaffirmed the transcendence of God and reclaimed a sense of evangelical freedom on the basis of a renewed sense of biblical authority. In the 1960s, Vatican II expressed a new openness to the world and optimism in Roman Catholic thought. In the 1970s, as the oppression of the poor in Latin America and the horror of the Holocaust became focuses of Christian theological reflection, this optimism was criticized. Reflection on the Holocaust led to criticism of anti-Jewish trends in Christology and reflection on the sufferings of victims of “man-made mass death.”<sup>5</sup> Reflection on the suffering of the poor and their struggles for justice led to new attention to what can be known historically about Jesus and the connections between his public ministry and death.

Contemporary Christologies have also been influenced by the explosion of difference in the 1960s, as oppressed peoples and social groups began to articulate their specific sufferings and hopes and struggle against their oppression by dominant cultures in Western societies. Theologians in these groups began to develop Christologies in light of these struggles. Some theologians from dominant social groups began to think about Christ in relation to these struggles and in light of their own privilege. Feminist concerns about the impact on women of the way Jesus’ maleness and saving significance have been understood have been particularly significant for feminist Christologies. Christian-Marxist dialogues challenged theologians to develop Christologies that would make a difference in the world, particularly in peoples’ living conditions. The phenomenon of globalization and the persistence of

many religions led some to ponder Christ's meaning in relation to religious pluralism. Late in the twentieth century, the environmental crisis raised new concerns about the saving significance of Jesus for nature and his implications for how nature should be understood.

Developments within Christian theology in the twentieth century have also influenced contemporary Christologies. Gustaf Aulén's classic book *Christus Victor*<sup>6</sup> presented an influential typology of three models of atonement that directed attention to the different ways in which Jesus' saving significance has been understood. The quest for the historical Jesus took on renewed life after World War II and became a significant factor for many contemporary Christologies. Karl Barth's emphasis on Jesus Christ as the decisive revelation in terms of which all attributes of God must be understood led to Christologies being developed as a much more integral part of the doctrine of God. A number of the Christologies studied in this book also reflect Dietrich Bonhoeffer's notion of Jesus as the person for others and Paul Tillich's understanding of Christ as addressing the particular alienation or oppressions of a given age. None of the Christologies studied here respond to all these events or incorporate all of these influences, but all are influenced by some of them, and all are developed in contexts that these events and social movements helped shape. Because Christologies tend to develop in relation to external and internal factors, these need to be considered when studying them. For this reason, the overview of each Christology in the chapters that follow begins with a brief biographical sketch of its author, noting influences on and significant developments in their thought.

An attempt has been made to include a diversity of voices in this introduction. But it is unlikely that any book could give an adequate overview of all contemporary Christologies. It would be difficult for any individual to keep up on all the work being done in Christology at present around the globe, or on all the significant Christologies produced in the past forty years. Anyone familiar with contemporary Christology will see that a few of their favorite theologians are missing. The Christologies of significant North Atlantic theologians like Wolfhart Pannenberg, Edward Schillebeeckx, and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza are not included here. There is no representative of African<sup>7</sup> or Australian Christologies. Only two representatives from Asian contexts are included and only one from South America. The choice of Christologies to be studied in this book was dictated by my sense of their significance in contemporary christological thought, a desire to have three examples

of each model of atonement being covered, and the limitations of my knowledge. This book is intended to be an introduction. It makes no claim to be comprehensive. It provides a sampling of contemporary Christologies and a discussion of how they understand Jesus. Hopefully readers will find it useful.

### Suggestions for Further Reading

- Brondos, David A. *Fortress Introduction to Salvation and the Cross*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007. An accessible and well-written survey of Western Christologies beginning with biblical traditions and working up to the present.
- Macquarrie, John. *Jesus Christ in Modern Thought*. Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1990. An overview of twentieth-century Western Christologies.
- Schüssler Fiorenza, Elisabeth. *Jesus: Miriam's Child, Sophia's Prophet: Critical Issues in Feminist Christology*. New York: Continuum, 1994. An influential feminist interpretation of New Testament Christology.
- Studer, Basil. *Trinity and Incarnation: The Faith of the Early Church*. Edited by Andrew Louth. Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical, 1993. A good overview of the development of patristic Christology up to the Council of Chalcedon.
- Tuckett, Christopher. *Christology and the New Testament: Jesus and His Earliest Followers*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001. An accessible overview of Christologies found in various New Testament traditions and writings.
- Wiley, Tatha, ed. *Thinking of Christ: Proclamation, Explanation, Meaning*. New York: Continuum, 2003. A good introduction to contemporary issues in Christology.

### Discussion Questions

1. What are the criteria for assessing the adequacy of a Christology?
2. Do you consider the teachings of the Councils of Nicaea and Chalcedon on the person of Jesus Christ to be normative?
3. Which of the various events of the twentieth century listed as influences on contemporary Christologies do you consider most important in your context?