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CHRISTOLOGY IN THE SERVICE OF FAITH

Joaquin C. Yap, Jr., S.W.

The Ubiquity of Christology

"Christology" is everywhere. Whether in popular art, in media, in serious theological textbooks, or in ordinary life, one encounters an interpretation, a "take," a "speech concerning Christ" (which is what "Christology" means in its most basic sense). Anne Rice of vampire-novel fame, for example, has authored two surprisingly respectful, well-researched, and elegantly crafted books on Jesus: *Christ the Lord: Out of Egypt* (2005) and *Christ the Lord: The Road to Cana* (2008); a third, *Christ the Lord: The Kingdom of Heaven*, is reportedly in progress. As for popular films, Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* (2004) remains unforgettable, while *Son of God* was released in 2014.

During my academic sabbatical in the winter of 2013–2014, I visited Christ Church Cathedral in Oxford. Surely, if "Christology" is ubiquitous in today's culture, it should surprise no one that a church would publicize its own Christological understanding. Thus inside the cathedral I encountered colorful posters ostensibly serving a catechetical purpose. One such poster was headlined "Jesus the Christ." It read: "Christians also call him 'Christ', which means the same as 'Messiah' or 'one who is anointed by God', because they believe he is a human being whose life uniquely manifests the life, love, and being of God." The text continued:

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> Although many followed him, others, including other religious leaders, saw him as a threat to their power and influence. He was put to death by crucifixion by the Roman Governor of Palestine, Pontius Pilate.
>
> After his death his closest followers experienced his continuing presence with them, convincing them that he was alive and empowering them to take his message out to the whole world.

These examples illustrate how easily and frequently one is confronted with a "Christological" statement in one form or another. We watch a "Jesus film" and, whether or not we realize it, are actually viewing someone else's "take" on Jesus—a cinematographic interpretation. One reads the poster inside Oxford's Cathedral and is treated to another "take" on Christ—unfortunately a reductionist one. Innumerable books have been written about Jesus. "The reason is obvious," says Gerhard Lohfink; it is because "we can never finish with him, and every age must encounter him anew."[1] Lohfink says that while some of these books on Jesus are very good, others are "very bad" and the reason is that "they are far from understanding that the real 'historical Jesus' cannot be grasped independently of faith in him."[2]

Not only is Christology in great abundance and found everywhere, it is also offered with often astonishing variety. There are many kinds of Christologies. In no other theological field has there been so much written, and no wonder—whether one considers Jesus dispassionately from a "scientific" or historical perspective or as a believer and follower, whether writing a scripture commentary or a spiritual meditation, there is surely no vaster and more bewildering array of books than those that concern "the figure of Jesus in the New Testament … the Jesus of the Gospels … the real, 'historical' Jesus."[3]

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[1]Gerhard Lohfink, *Jesus of Nazareth: What He Wanted, Who He Was* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2012), xi.

[2]Lohfink, *Jesus of Nazareth*, xi.

[3]Benedict XVI (Joseph Ratzinger), *Jesus of Nazareth, Vol. 1: From the Baptism in the Jordan to the Transfiguration*, trans. Adrian J. Walker (New York, etc.: Doubleday, 2007), xxi–xxii.

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Widely disparate interpretations of the "Jesus of the Gospels" abound. Filipino SVD theologian Benigno Beltran observes that there

> are countless images of the Christ: the images of Jesus in the New Testament, those elaborated by the ecumenical councils of the Church, the Christ venerated in popular devotion, the Christ portrayed by theologians, the Christ depicted by artists, the Christ of the enthusiasts and the fundamentalists, the Christ of the revolutionaries, and many more.[4]

There are Christologies written from various perspectives and contexts: liberationist, feminist, bourgeois, political, ecological, and so forth. Teilhard de Chardin's "cosmic Christ" continues to appeal to certain readers. "At present," Gerhard Lohfink observes, "he must above all stand for the legitimation of universal tolerance, which is no longer interested in truth and therefore threatens to slide off into arbitrariness."[5] All such attempts to interpret the mystery of Jesus Christ arise from the sociological or theological fashion current at the time that makes the interpretation noteworthy, popular, even plausible.

But beyond mere trendiness, a few ways of doing Christology have stood the test of time. Classical Christology—that which was for the most part practiced by the Fathers and Doctors of the Church—has been called a "Christology from above." Also called a "descending Christology," its starting point is the Triune God, and the eternal Son's "descent" as it were into our history and our world. A good scriptural verse to describe this approach is John 1:14: "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us." This approach is often a "high" Christology due to its robust account of Christ's divinity, although with a "high Christology" there is no assurance that equal weight will be given to Christ's full humanity. St. Clement of Alexandria, for example, of that catechetical "school" in Upper Egypt which championed this approach—with its starting point in the Logos who became incarnate in Jesus Christ—thought that Jesus simply went through the motions of

[4]Benigno P. Beltran, *The Christology of the Inarticulate: An Inquiry into the Filipino Understanding of Jesus the Christ* (Manila: Divine Word Publications, 1987), 3.

[5]Lohfink, *Jesus of Nazareth*, 16.

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eating and drinking since he had no real need for physical nourishment (*Stromateis* 6.9).[6] Another famous Alexandrian, St. Athanasius, argued in his *De Incarnatione*: "How could He fall sick, Who had healed others? Or how could that body weaken and fail by means of which others are made strong?" (§ 21). Thus is the danger of a "high Christology" slipping inadvertently into almost docetic affirmations.[7]

Doing "Christology from above" is a perfectly legitimate approach and has been done with masterful and edifying result by St. Thomas Aquinas, Karl Barth, and Karl Rahner, among others. This approach, although having a "high" regard for Christ's full divinity, must of necessity "descend" and give a full account of his humanity in the Incarnation. Only then can it do full justice to Chalcedon's teaching of two *complete* natures in one person (who is himself divine). James Martin wrote:

> If we lose sight of either perspective, we risk turning Jesus into either God pretending to be a man, or a man pretending to be God. To fully meet Jesus Christ, the believer needs both to understand the Jesus of history, the man who walked the earth, and to encounter the Christ of faith, the one who rose from the dead.[8]

O'Collins expresses the dilemma this way:

> The figure in the manger may cry like any baby. He may grow up seemingly just another boy playing on the streets of Nazareth. He may preach in the style of a wandering rabbi. The Roman forces of occupation can put him to death by that hideous combination of impalement and display which they called crucifixion. But all the same we know he is really God and this injects an element of make-believe

[6]Cited by Gerald O'Collins, *Christology: A Biblical, Historical, and Systematic Study of Jesus* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 18.

[7]Beltran notes the Filipino believer's propensity to regard Jesus as mainly or almost entirely divine. He writes: "In the face of the survey findings about strong docetic tendencies in the people's understanding of Christ, Christology in the Philippines must clarify the implications of Jesus' having taken the fullness of our *karupukan* [frailty, weakness] except sin" (cf. *Christology of the Inarticulate*, 231).

[8]James Martin, "That He May Be One," *America* (February 17, 2014): 12.

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> into the whole life-story from Bethlehem on. He looks like a man, speaks like a man, suffers and dies like a man. But underneath he is divine, and this makes his genuine humanity suspect. Is he no more than God in disguise?[9]

Thomas Rausch argues that this mentality is fairly common among our contemporaries. "They find it hard to believe that he had to face real temptations, that he had to struggle to integrate his sexuality, discern God's will for himself, and discover his own vocation."[10] This is because they are accustomed to think of Jesus primarily from the standpoint of his divinity. The result is a kind of "practical Monophysitism" in which they might not necessarily avow belief in Christ having only one nature, that is, simply divine, but in their relationship with him that is what it amounts to.[11]

Thus, the classical approach is today increasingly overshadowed by one that emphasizes Christ's humanity. It is argued that modern people have a greater difficulty accepting that Jesus was fully human.[12] Christology "from above" has been steadily replaced by that which begins from the other pole, "from below" (which might also be called an "ascending Christology"). As these labels suggest, the starting point is the human story of Jesus of Nazareth: his life, ministry, teachings, his last days, and his death. Christologies "from below" are concerned with examining Jesus in the midst of his people; "context" is important, as well as the historical background of Israel in the Old Testament. If a Christology "from above" gives priority to John's gospel, with its "high" Christological presentation of Jesus, then a Christology "from below" privileges the synoptic gospels. This stems

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[9]Gerald O'Collins, *What Are They Saying About Jesus?* (New York/Ramsey: Paulist, 1983), 6.

[10]Thomas P. Rausch, *Who is Jesus? An Introduction to Christology* (Collegeville: Liturgical/Michael Glazier, 2003), 5.

[11]Rausch, *Who is Jesus?*, 5.

[12]Albeit James Martin, a keen observer of the contemporary scene, would argue that if Jesus' humanity is a problem for people today, "his divinity is even more so" (cf. his *Jesus: A Pilgrimage* [New York: HarperCollins, 2014], 462).

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from the reasonable assumption that the synoptic gospels, being older in composition than the gospel of John, are less "touched up" by the evangelist's interpretation.

The crucial thing to note is that there is no ideal or perfect approach. "The approach from below is not without its limitations. […] The danger is particularly great that the ideal humanity [which one purports to see in Jesus] would be determined by philosophical prejudices."[13] A Christology "from below" must face squarely the challenge of showing how such a very human life (Jesus of Nazareth) could in fact *be* the eternal Son of God. Attention to the full humanity of Jesus must be counterweighted by a necessary affirmation of his full divinity. Chalcedon may not be bypassed. Contemporary theologians who write a Christology "from below" sometimes end up with a "low Christology." So, in fact, Gerald O'Collins insists that all these Christological approaches must complement each other: "In Christology we need both approaches, 'from above' and 'from below', just as the whole Church has been enduringly enriched by the schools of both Alexandria and Antioch."[14]

Ultimately, too, all of these "labels" are unhelpful. The descriptions "from above" or "from below" simply tell us the *starting point* of the Christological investigation. The labels do not tell us whether the Christology will actually "ascend" or "descend"; they do not indicate how successfully the investigation will go on in affirming, without ambiguity and without reserve, the full doctrine of Chalcedon.[15]

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[13]Beltran, *Christology of the Inarticulate*, 215. In his endnotes, Beltran refers the reader to the International Theological Commission's *Select Questions in Christology*.

[14]O'Collins, *Christology*, 17.

[15]These labels also become judgmental evaluations, one theologian who favors one approach insinuating that the other approach is woefully deficient and not to be trusted. Thus Pope Benedict XVI, after writing the first volume of his *Jesus of Nazareth*, reports receiving this feedback: "A Catholic theologian has labeled my book, together with Romano Guardini's masterpiece, *The Lord*, as an example of 'Christology from above', not without issuing a warning about the dangers inherent in such an approach. The truth is that I have not attempted

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What About *Filipino* Christology?

Beltran must surely be commended for his exploratory book, *The Christology of the Inarticulate: An Inquiry into the Filipino Understanding of Jesus the Christ*. Although dated by now (it was published almost 30 years ago), Beltran's study still holds much validity today and his use of sociological survey tools grounds his assertions.

Should Filipino Christology be descending or ascending? The increasing influence of the *Iglesia ni Kristo* and of other sects such as the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints and the Jehovah's Witnesses makes a strong case for an approach "from above," if only to affirm from the outset Jesus' full divinity. Beltran himself favors starting with Jesus' humanity given the Filipino's tendency to embrace a docetic view of Christ.

> The weightier argument, however, against the use of the descending approach is that it begins with the idea of God and his relation to the world and then fits into it the teaching of Scripture. The classical point of departure presupposed a metaphysics and a systematic idea of God, the kind that Greek philosophy provided Christian theologians in the West. There is no such articulated philosophy in the Philippines.[16]

The great merit of Beltran's book is its piquant and earnest quest to do a quite different sort of "Christology from below," that is, from the vantage point of poor, simple, "almost illiterate" Filipino believers who scavenge for retrievable refuse amidst Manila's then-largest garbage dump.

> What happens when Filipino believers, with their quasi-animist, spiritualist worldview, are compelled to articulate their faith using concepts and categories from Western philosophy? […] The Church's teaching concerning the person and work of Jesus has been articulated in the clear, precise categories of dogmatic propositions and embodied

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to write a Christology" (*Jesus of Nazareth, Vol. 2: Holy Week from the Entrance into Jerusalem to the Resurrection*, trans. Philip J. Whitmore [San Francisco: Ignatius, 2011], xv–xvi).

[16]Beltran, *Christology of the Inarticulate*, 216.

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> in the Creeds. Catechetical instruction in the past were [*sic*] based on dogmatic pronouncements and credal propositions articulated within the horizon of Greek metaphysics. The main problem confronted [by Beltran in his book] is how Christological concepts and categories can be understood within Filipino patterns of thought and expressed in the various Filipino languages.[17]

Christology at the Mercy of the "Scholars"

Besides the question of Christological approach and starting point, there is the matter of whether one writes primarily as a "scientist" and "objective scholar" or as a believer seeking understanding (thus *fides quaerens intellectum*); whether one strives for timeless, ahistorical, metacultural affirmations or sees the Christological enterprise precisely as bridging the universality of faith in Jesus and the particularity of a local history and culture. Moreover, simple believers are often at the mercy of (almost entirely Western) theologians, scholars, and sometimes merely popular authors who write from their highly personal stance.Perhaps at this point it might be useful to give a brief overview of the modern trends in Christological research, often under the heading of various "quests" for the "historical Jesus."

Historians generally agree that the first modern "quest" was launched with the posthumous publication of Hermann Samuel Reimarus' "Fragments" in the late 18th century. It was a thoroughly skeptical and liberal piece of theological writing. Reimarus "declared that if we were to ask serious historical questions about Jesus, we would discover that Christianity was based on a mistake"; worse, "the whole thing was a tissue of lies."[18] Overall, the First Quest (which covered the rest of the 18th century through to the beginning of the 20th century) was a liberal quest, ruled by Enlightenment philosophical presuppositions. Most of its practitioners were hostile to orthodox

[17]Beltran, *Christology of the Inarticulate*, viii–ix.

[18]N. T. Wright, *Who Was Jesus?* (London: SPCK, 1992), 2.

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Christian teaching and their work was often not as objective as they claimed. "Their attempt to read the Gospels through the lenses of the Enlightenment resulted in a reconstructed Jesus fashioned in their own image."[19] However, it would be unjust to write off the entirety of the First Quest. It was in this period that standard biblical constructs which we today take for granted took shape: the priority of Mark, the "Q" source, the distinction between the "Jesus of history" and the "Christ of faith," and so forth.

Somewhere between the First Quest and the Second Quest, and eluding both categories, we have the figures of Rudolf Bultmann and Karl Barth. Though working from vastly different theological perspectives, they commonly held to a discontinuity between the historical Jesus of the gospels and the Christ of faith. Bultmann especially maintained that knowledge of the historical Jesus was not really attainable and, in any case, was not really important.[20]

> It was as believer and theologian that Bultmann showed himself a radical reductionist, claiming that we neither can nor should found our Christian faith and theology on any supposedly "objective" basis in history—apart from one objectively historical event, the crucifixion. We need do no more than affirm the *dass* ["that-ness"], the mere fact that Jesus existed and was crucified, without enquiring about the *was* ["what"], what Jesus was in his own history.[21]

It was a former student of Bultmann, Ernst Käsemann, who challenged the view of his famous mentor. "Does the New Testament kerygma (proclamation) count the historical Jesus among the criteria of its own validity?" he asked. "We have to answer this question roundly in the affirmative."[22] Many scholars resonated with his intuition that

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[19]Rausch, *Who is Jesus?*, 11.

[20]Rausch, *Who is Jesus?*, 14. "Beyond doubt, Bultmann proved himself to be the arch-minimalizer of the relevance of Jesus' human history for Christian faith" (Gerald O'Collins, *Interpreting Jesus* [London & New York: Mowbray, 1983], 37).

[21]O'Collins, *Christology*, 6.

[22]Ernst Käsemann, "Blind Alleys in the 'Jesus of History' Controversy," in *New Testament Questions of Today* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1969), 48, cited by

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there must be a critical and radical continuity between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith, without which the proclamation of the Good News would itself become meaningless and defenseless. Thus was the Second Quest launched in the mid-twentieth century. On the plus side, their practitioners were no longer over-burdened by the Enlightenment's rationalist principles and secular mindset. Rausch sums up their other achievements:

> Their efforts to interpret Jesus through the medium of his preaching meant taking much more seriously the Palestinian Jewish background of Jesus, and by implication, the Jewish religious tradition which shaped his own religious identity and imagination. They have refined the tools for the historical-critical study of texts and their research has expanded immeasurably our knowledge of the way the New Testament traditions developed. They also took seriously the meaning of the preaching of Jesus for his own time.[23]

On the debit side, they could not completely shake off some liberal presuppositions. "They too easily dismissed the miraculous as mythological, and had difficulty with the eschatological and the prophetic. In this sense, the New [Second] Quest was still very much a product of modernity."[24]

In the early part of the 1980s, some scholars began to speak of a "Third Quest" for the historical Jesus. If its predecessor relied upon and honed literary disciplines such as form criticism, redaction criticism, and tradition criticism, this Third Quest added to these tools the use of

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Rausch, *Who Is Jesus?*, 14. Käsemann

> argued strongly that the "Christ" who is worshipped by the church must be firmly attached to the real Jesus who lived in Palestine in the first century, and who died on a cross. Without that attachment, the word "Jesus" becomes a mere cipher. We can pull and push it this way or that without any control. "Jesus" can be invoked to support all kinds of programmes. To prevent this, we need serious Jesus-research. (Wright, *Who Was Jesus?*, 8)

[23]Rausch, *Who is Jesus?*, 20.

[24]Rausch, *Who Is Jesus?*, 15.

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properly historical methods and the social sciences.[25] Thus in the last 30 years we have learned a great deal more about the life of Jesus, the world he lived in, his preaching, imagination, purpose, and mission. There has been considerable interest in his "very words" (*ipsissima verba*). The latter has been taken somewhat to extremes by the Jesus Seminar, a group started in 1985 and composed of theologians and others. Their much-publicized method of voting on the authenticity of Jesus' words by means of colored beads (red to indicate the high likelihood that Jesus spoke the very words, pink to indicate good probability, grey to deny the *ipsissima verba* but affirming that they contain Jesus' ideas, and black to judge that neither the words nor the ideas ever came from him) has been derided. Lohfink, for example, writes: "Such drawing of boundaries [of authenticity], which is carried out among biblical scholars with an immense expenditure of intelligence and acuity, have a little whiff of silliness."[26]

There is much more at stake than "a little whiff of silliness." Take, for example, the group's attitude towards the resurrection of Christ, in the words of the Jesus Seminar's founder, Robert Funk. He had presented the proposition "The resurrection was an event in the life of Jesus" to his colleagues in the Seminar. In *Honest to Jesus: Jesus for a New Millennium* (San Francisco: Harper, 1996), Funk reports:

> My proposition was received with hilarity by several Fellows. One suggested that it was an oxymoron …. Others alleged that the formulation was meaningless, since we all assume, they said, that Jesus' life ended with his crucifixion and death. I was surprised by this response. I shouldn't have been. After all, John Dominic Crossan has confessed, "I do not think that anyone, anywhere, at any time brings dead people back to life." That's fairly blunt. But it squares with what we really know, as distinguished from what many want to believe. Sheehan is even blunter: "Jesus, regardless of where his corpse ended up, is dead and remains dead."[27]

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[25]Rausch, *Who Is Jesus?*, 15.

[26]Lohfink, *Jesus of Nazareth*, 23.

[27]Cited by Carl E. Braaten, "The Resurrection Debate Revisited," *Pro Ecclesia* 8:2 (Spring 1999): 147–158, in 147.

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It seems to me that the participants of the Jesus Seminar have carried "objective" scholarly research to an arrogant extreme. Their irreverence in the face of what is supremely holy might be egregious. But one can cite many more examples of contemporary theologians who, writing from a predominantly historical-critical and supposedly "scientific" perspective, have jettisoned most of the traditional ways of understanding the God-man, Jesus of Nazareth. For Bultmann, the resurrection was "not an event of past history with a self-evident meaning" but rather "a mythical event pure and simple."[28] Wolfhart Pannenberg affirms the incarnation but denies the virginal conception of Jesus. John Hick, in *The Metaphor of God Incarnate* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993; 2nd ed. London: SCM Press, 2005), attributes belief in Jesus' divinity to an apotheosis promoted by the early Christians which reached its climax at the Council of Nicaea. "Incarnation" for Hick has occurred and is still occurring in many different ways and degrees, in many different persons. Thus Jesus differs from us not in kind but only in degree (e.g., of holiness and closeness to God). Sallie McFague calls Jesus "a parable of God" who, as "the key exemplar," demonstrated a new relationship with God. It is "illegitimate" to identify him with God, she writes; an incarnational understanding of Jesus would be a form of idolatry, namely, "Jesusolatry."[29]

These are examples of scholarly "reconstructions" of the historical Jesus which, as one theologian after another presented his or her own "version" of Christ, "became more and more incompatible with one another" and, as a result, the figure of Jesus "became increasingly obscured and blurred."[30]

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[28]Rudolf Bultmann, "New Testament and Mythology," in Hans-Werner Bartsch, ed., *Kerygma and Myth: A Theological Debate*, Vol. 1 (London: SPCK, 1964), cited by Rausch, *Who is Jesus?*, 118.

[29]Sallie McFague, *Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982), 18, 44–54, 111, cited by Gerald O'Collins & Daniel Kendall, *The Bible for Theology* (New York: Paulist Press, 1997), 170, n. 2.

[30]Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth* Vol. 1, xii.

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> All these attempts have produced a common result: the impression that we have very little certain knowledge of Jesus and that only at a later stage did faith in his divinity shape the image we have of him. This impression has by now penetrated deeply into the minds of the Christian people at large. This is a dramatic situation for faith, because its point of reference is being placed in doubt: Intimate friendship with Jesus, on which everything depends, is in danger of clutching at thin air.[31]

Christology in the Service of Faith

When one surveys these "quests" for the "Jesus of history," one cannot help but notice how often the venture has been dogged by persistent philosophical presuppositions inherited from the Enlightenment: a deistic understanding of God, the rejection of miracles, history as a closed system into which the supernatural must not be allowed to intrude, etc. But historical criticism need not be hostile to Christian faith. If it recognizes its inherent limits, then it can accomplish its necessary and fundamental task of opening up new and better ways of understanding the Jesus of the gospels. It can be faith's ally, not its adversary.

Many practitioners of the various "quests" who aimed for scientific objectivity ended up with a "prejudice against prejudice," to borrow O'Collins' helpful phrase.[32] They have reversed St. Augustine's axiom, "believe in order to understand" (*crede ut intelligas*), and made it read, "if you believe (with the preunderstanding of a Christian), then you will not (really) understand." We must challenge this methodology of utmost "scientific objectivity" in the study of Jesus Christ. In the pure or natural sciences, we can concede that the object being studied permits of a method that is completely objective and dispassionate. However, even in this case, the data that is gathered still needs to be interpreted, as there can be no "pure facts" which are *in themselves*

[31]Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth* Vol. 1, xii.

[32]O'Collins, *Christology*, 215.

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meaningful; they only become meaningful *when interpreted*. To compound the problem, this purely objective method may not be used without any modification whatsoever for the "social sciences." Here one deals with human persons who cannot be "scientifically studied" without consideration of relationality, intersubjectivity, freedom, and the like. Human beings are not mere "problems"; they are "mysteries." How much more when one "studies" God and deals with the phenomenon of Jesus Christ? O'Collins puts it neatly: "If we cannot imagine and describe what it would be like to be God, we cannot imagine and describe what it would be like to be God and man."[33]

> When studying the earthly Jesus, some scholars still limit themselves to applying typically "scientific" methods modelled on the modern natural sciences or at least on their understanding of them. They take up particular gospel sayings or events and analyse them in an "objective" fashion, wrenching them apart from the living world of Jesus and his followers and reducing them to their smallest elements. They isolate and take apart these sayings and events, as if such separation and reduction were *the* way to know and understand Jesus. All of this insinuates an attempt to dominate him as if he were simply a problem "back there". They forget that really knowing another person in depth always demands our participation in and relationship to another personal mystery.[34]

It follows that theologians who take seriously their craft as being both scientific and historical must, at the same time, remind themselves that there are definite limits to that method of inquiry. They need to be braced with a necessary and healthy "prejudice against prejudice against prejudice," so to speak. "But when biblical critics measure Jesus only by their own prior understanding, deciding ahead of time what is 'historically possible' and what is 'historically impossible,' they exceed their own limitations."[35] More bluntly, Lohfink describes all scholarly interpretations which "tone down" the biblical texts—"because we moderns, in our skeptical resignation, no longer

[33]O'Collins, *Christology*, 234.

[34]O'Collins, *Christology*, 49–50.

[35]Lohfink, *Jesus of Nazareth*, xi.

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consider it possible for communities to take the gospel seriously"—as a "miserable hermeneutic."[36]

In the second volume of what became his *Jesus of Nazareth* trilogy, Pope Benedict XVI wrote: "It strikes me as both presumptuous and naïve to seek to shed light on Jesus' consciousness and to try to explain it in terms of what he could or could not have thought, given our knowledge of the period and its theological outlook."[37] We could expand his comment about theological presumption and naiveté to describe all attempts to "grasp" Jesus Christ as if he were an object that can be handled, weighed, measured, and analyzed.

Perhaps it is not even necessary to call such scholars' honesty or competence into question. We can simply remind ourselves that any writer is a product of his or her particular history and worldview; one looks at the world and studies texts with eyeglasses tinted by personal and historical circumstances. O'Collins recalls an apt observation of Albert Schweitzer; this great figure of the First Quest wrote in *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*: "it was not only each epoch that found its reflection in Jesus; each individual created Him in accordance with his own character."[38] Eisegesis is just as easy to fall into, and just as unacceptable, in systematic theology as it is in biblical interpretation.

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[36]Gerhard Lohfink, *Jesus and Community: The Social Dimension of Christian Faith*, trans. John P. Galvin (London: SPCK, 1985), 162 (italicized in original).

[37]Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth* Vol. 2, 136–137.

[38]Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, 2nd ed. (London: A. & C. Black, 1936), 4, cited by O'Collins, *Christology*, 221. Even Thomas Aquinas could have looked upon Jesus with "Dominican-tinted glasses"; for Aquinas, "Christ handed on the fruits of his contemplation ('contemplata tradere': [*Summa theologiae*] 40. 1 *ad* 2; 40. 3 *ad* 3), by acting as a preacher of 'the Word of God' (40. 3 *resp.*; 41. 3 *ad* 1) and combining the contemplative and active life (40. 1 *ad* 2 and 3)" (O'Collins, *Christology*, 205). And perhaps

> Küng presses anachronistic language into service and finishes up with a Jesus whose conflicts with Jewish leaders—dare one say it?—prefigure the author's battles with Church authorities. *On Being a Christian* repeatedly speaks of the "Jewish hierarchy" whose zeal for

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The rationalism of the Enlightenment embraced a deistic outlook which ruled out God's intervention in the world—if there even was a God. If a scholar denies *a priori* the miraculous, then of course Jesus is only human and all the supernaturalist claims of Christians regarding him are later accretions and exaggerations. But if instead the scholar "posits that the biblical God exists, acts in the world, and does so through human beings … then [he or she] can at least accept Jesus' claim *as a claim* and not attempt to use historical criticism to weaken it or eliminate it entirely."[39] C. S. Lewis wrote that the "central miracle asserted by Christians is the Incarnation. […] Every other miracle prepares for this, or exhibits this, or results from this."[40] It is easy to follow the logic: If a theologian chucks the traditional understanding of the Incarnation (i.e., that God the Son assumed a human nature and was born a human being while remaining God), then all that is supernatural and miraculous in the gospels, including the Resurrection, becomes suspect. The stories are "demythologized" or explained away. But, accept that God the Son truly became a human being—and why can't God do that?—and all other doubts about the miraculous fade away.

What we need today is a new alliance between historical criticism and (what Benedict XVI calls) a faith-hermeneutic. A "properly developed faith-hermeneutic is appropriate to the text and can be combined with a historical hermeneutic, aware of its limits, so as to form a methodological whole."[41] Let us be very clear, the pope emeritus writes: the historical-critical method "is and remains an indispensable dimension of exegetical work. For it is of the very essence of biblical

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the "prevailing dogmas" and "infallible propositions" brings Jesus down. (O'Collins, *What Are They Saying?*, 25)

[39]Lohfink, *Jesus of Nazareth*, 346.

[40]C. S. Lewis, *Miracles: A Preliminary Study* (Glasgow: Collins/Fount Paperbacks, 1984), 112.

[41]Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth* Vol. 2, xv.

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faith to be about real historical events.'"[42] Not only does responsible historical research illuminate the world in which Jesus lived, even more importantly "it works out the relationships among the sources of the gospels, illuminates the various layers of tradition, and thus sharpens our perception of what the evangelists wanted to say about Jesus in their 'final text.'"[43] This tells us that form criticism, redaction criticism, and all the other criticisms, when carried out with the right spirit—that is to say, with a non-hostile attitude of *rapprochement*—can truly aid the believer and the Church as a whole to understand, encounter, and adore the Jesus of the gospels.[44] Is it too much to propose its role today as that used to describe classical philosophy's role vis-à-vis theology: as handmaid to theology?

To sum up: If it is hard enough to know a human person, how much harder it must be to know a divine person, one who lived on earth 2,000 years ago, whose extant "biographical" material are just as old and do not add up to form a complete biography in the modern sense of the word. This is precisely where the "tools" come in: handy, serviceable ones which equip the theologian *working as a believer and never simply as a "scientist"* to formulate "speech about Christ" (Christology) that is

[42]Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth* Vol. 1, xv. "Historical criticism inquires persistently about what happened, and thus it demonstrates that Christianity is about real history and not about myths or ideologies" (Lohfink, *Jesus of Nazareth*, xi).

[43]Lohfink, *Jesus of Nazareth*, xi.

[44]C. S. Lewis wrote humorously, ironically, and perhaps sardonically about the "unhistorical 'historical Jesus'" reconstructions of the historians in *The Screwtape Letters*. In Letter XXIII, Screwtape the senior devil writes:

> Our third aim is, by these constructions, to destroy the devotional life. For the real presence of the Enemy, otherwise experienced by men in prayer and sacrament, we substitute a merely probable, remote, shadowy, and uncouth figure, one who spoke a strange language and died a long time ago. Such an object cannot in fact be worshipped. (cf. C. S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* [London: Geoffrey Bles/Centenary, 1943], 118)

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