



Christology and the Pluralist Consciousness*

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If I am not mistaken, christological reflection is crossing a threshold. It is entering an unfamiliar room and its gestures are shy and awkward. It seeks a friendly face, an inconspicuous place to stand. Hardly at home in the historical room, it is now crowded into another, more disturbing one, a room which demands that it react to a new consciousness of pluralism. Christological reflection is leaving behind the worries of historical consciousness. Now, new worrisome signals usher it into the space of a pluralist consciousness. In that new room, so many attractive places beckon that consciousness itself seems to be taking on a new structure.¹ It is being constituted by the many-ness of attractive orientations in the world. The new pluralism and the hints of a genuine pluralist construction of reality promise a new crisis for theology.² This new crisis threatens to overtake and surprise christology, just as the historical consciousness shocked orthodox christologies.³ Now plural truths, plural realities, plural

*Mr. Wilson's essay is the first of two concerned with current christological reflection. The second essay, a response to Mr. Wilson by Pat Keifert, follows immediately after.-Ed.

¹I refer, of course, to the distinct structures of existence which John Cobb and others advocate: see *The Structure of Christian Existence* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1967) 16ff.

²As I see it, the literature that may help us analyze a pluralist construction of reality is still rather scant. There are some older pieces which display the opening of Christian theology to pluralist concerns, such as: Bernard Lonergan, *Doctrinal Pluralism* (Milwaukee: Marquette University, 1971); Karl Rahner, "Pluralism in Theology and the Oneness of the Church's Profession of Faith," *The Development of Fundamental Theology*, ed. Johann Baptist Metz, Concilium 46 (New York: Paulist Press, 1969); the theologian who has placed the pluralist consciousness at the center of his theology is David Tracy: see *Blessed Rage for Order* (New York: Seabury, 1975) 3-21 and *The Analogical Imagination* (New York: Crossroad, 1981) 366ff. especially, where Tracy directs pluralism away from eclecticism. Langdon Gilkey's new book continues the cultural analysis and religious dimension argument associated with his name; the culture in question is one with reawakened sacral signals, a distrust of science, and a new sense of pluralism: *Society and the Sacred* (New York: Crossroad, 1981).

³I am convinced that the knowledge we have of theology's reaction to the historical consciousness may provide us with some formal clues to the crisis ahead for theology in its confrontation with pluralism. But I am also convinced that the new pluralist consciousness is not *simply* an extension of the historical consciousness, even though the historical consciousness may well be a decisive factor in the emergence of a genuine pluralist consciousness. Relativism and even a sense for diversity constitute consciousness in a way different from the pluralist encounter with the many. It is not just that the real is historically conditioned but that the real is many.

points of view interrupt christological discussions; they insist on the right to qualify virtually every traditional moment of christology. So too the pluralist orientation willingly hurls christology into considerations unheard of only a few years ago.

I wish to argue that the center of current christological reflection is its preliminary reactions to a new pluralist consciousness. I will first show how certain older issues for christology disappear because of pluralist pressures. Then, I will show how pluralist sensibilities reshape issues internal to the doing of christology. Finally I will notice the new work in which religious pluralism is explicitly a problem for christology.

I. CLEARING THE DECKS

Pluralists recognize that human life in the world shows itself in radically different problematics. Genuinely different experiences of the “human predicament” appear. Pluralists may even intuit within themselves several ways in which life presents itself as a problem. Gone for the pluralist is the sense that life burns with anyone question, anyone problem. Pluralists, consequently, cannot fix on only one mode of knowing or one method of interpretation. For them no single voyage of discovery tells all; no one revelation steals the show. They grow up in a world which proliferates paradigms, and they can make sense of things only by juggling the many models available to them. Pluralists recognize that sources for sense-making are many, the routes to unfold them several. Most important of all, pluralists find themselves attracted to distinct resolutions to the questions of life. Moreover, they recognize that each resolution may evoke a different comportment in the world. It makes no difference to us whether pluralists intuit and recognize plural options at once or whether they juggle among options. In either case, consciousness finds itself in a new room. The age of the single problematic—of the solitary method and resolution—is past. Unities are suspect, harmonizing is resisted.

Christocentrism is a solitary attempt that troubles a pluralist. A christocentric christology, in TeSelle’s words, imagines that “the incarnation is the center and aim of creation and of all God’s activity toward the world.”⁴ According to TeSelle, this is the option of Duns Scotus; but the christocentric option in modern theology undoubtedly draws from themes of the Reformers, finds its definition in Schleiermacher, and comes to prevalence in neo-orthodoxy. For current christology, christocentrism is the “whipping boy,” the difficulty to be solved.⁵ Pannenberg’s *Jesus—God and Man* is, perhaps, the last comprehensive

⁴Eugene TeSelle, *Christ in Context. Divine Purpose and Human Possibility* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975) xi.

⁵Ibid. TeSelle’s entire book is a critique of Christocentrism; see also Tom F. Driver, *Christ in a Changing World. Toward an Ethical Christology* (New York: Crossroad, 1981); Jean Milet, *God or Christ? The Excesses of Christocentricity* (New York: Crossroad, 1981); Rosemary R. Ruether, *Faith and Fratricide* (New York: Seabury, 1974) and her recent book: *To Change the World: Christology and Criticism* (New York: Crossroad, 1981). See also: Carl E. Braaten, “Christological Reflections,” *AAR Christology Newsletter* II/No. 2 (April, 1982) 2 where Braaten bemoans the loss of the christocentric focus in recent theology and ethics.

christocentric program.⁶ For Pannenberg the resurrection of Jesus is the definitive clue to the nature of the real and to the identity of God; it is the gateway to the known and to the hoped-for in life. Hardly anyone, however, is, much impressed that Pannenberg can find all this in the resurrection of Jesus. Even fewer are impressed that his attempt should be salvaged. Instead, his monumental christology has become a footnote and an item for indices. Scholars simply do not wish to filter all things through the Christ. Perhaps for good reason. Many good theologies have never wanted to be christocentric. And now the christocentric approach is under a moral attack.

Soelle names the risk inherent to the christocentric principle as “christofascism.”⁷ Ruether, more than anyone else, draws the connection between the christocentric principle, exclusivist theology and religious intolerance.⁸

Pluralists naturally oppose the christocentrism of the major theologies of the first half of this century. Their world, after all, has undergone a *paradigm shift*, as Driver speaks of it.⁹ Christ is no longer the center of all things, perhaps not even of Christian faith. Pluralists now seek a non-Christ-centered christology to nourish faith amid competing claims in complicated times.¹⁰ That a Christ-centered christology is unnecessary now, even undesirable, may well drive current christology away from the historical Jesus. Perhaps christologists are remembering that little can be known about the historical Jesus. More likely, they sense that what can be known is uninteresting for contemporary faith. In any case, the questions raised by historical research into the gospels, the New Testament, and the life of Jesus no longer capture christology.¹¹ Both the old and the new quests are gone.¹² Few theologians struggle with the relationship of faith to history as a Bultmann or a Pannenberg have. Apparently the relationship of *Jesus* to *Christ* is just not as christologically interesting as it has been. Few critics believe that a Küng (or a Sobrino, or more recently, a Ruether) can

⁶Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Jesus—God and Man* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1968).

⁷See Driver, *Christ*, 3, 15, 19; cf. Soelle’s critique of theological sadism in *Suffering* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975) 22ff.

⁸See both Ruether books listed above.

⁹Driver, *Christ*, 45.

¹⁰Howard Burkle, “The Christ of Realized Eschatology,” *AAR Christology Newsletter* I/No. 4 (November, 1981) 1-9, for an attempt to argue for a relativized reading of realized eschatology against Christian exclusivism.

¹¹Hardly a christology of the last two or three years is occupied with the historical Jesus as were so many in the 1960s and 1970s. One notable exception is that Roman Catholic christologies continue to work through the historical-critical field still relatively new to them. It is fair to say that some of these christologies are “catching up” on a liberal Protestant task of the last two centuries. The Jesuit, Michael L. Cook, writes one such book, *The Jesus of Faith* (New York: Paulist Press, 1981); after presenting a New Quest argument for the continuity between Jesus and the Christ, Cook uses Schoonenberg, Pannenberg, Moltmann and Hodgson to get him to distinct theological reflections about the historical Jesus. No new ground is covered, except that in his final pages he admits to the new crisis of religious plurality. Schillebeeckx’s monumental christological project has been charged with historical-critical catch-up, but as “The Authority of New Experiences and the Authority of the New Testament” of *Christ* makes it clear, his is a program that has departed from the scope of Quest christologies; it is hermeneutically complicated in a way that Quest christologies are not. Edward Schillebeeckx, *Christ. The Experience of Jesus as Lord* (New York: Seabury, 1980) 27-79.

¹²See this point recently argued in William M. Thompson’s *Jesus, Lord and Savior. A Theopathic Christology and Soteriology* (New York: Paulist Press, 1980) 9.

successfully take the historical Jesus as the norm of christology. Nearly everyone is suspicious of earlier concerns for the “purity” of Christian origins. I cannot think of any scholar who is happy with Pannenberg’s demonstration of the event-character of Jesus’ resurrection. No one seems interested in proving the resurrection of Jesus.¹³ All of these observations about the current christological scene intimate that christologists no longer find the terms of discussion set by the historical consciousness to be compelling. Schweitzer is vindicated. A Jesus found in historical-critical reconstruction is either alien and unhelpful for our christological needs, or is the alter ego of our noble sentiments and therefore unneeded.¹⁴ In Driver’s words, the recent uneasiness with

historical concerns stems from a sense that history imprisons christology.¹⁵

The historical orientation cannot hold the day. If history imprisons christology, its starting point can no longer be Jesus of Nazareth.¹⁶ There is an irony here, of course. Fifteen years ago, the consensus ruled that one started christology in the historical Jesus. The notable exception was the transcendental wing among Roman Catholic christologies.. Nearly everyone wanted to do christology “from below.”¹⁷ One began with our historically reconstructed knowledge of Jesus of Nazareth and in some way or another found that Christ-sized clothes could fit his figure. But now, the “from-below” approach is widely rejected.¹⁸ Even Pannenberg, who brought the approach to fashion, gives up on it as too narrow.¹⁹ Today there is less confidence that one can *get christology* out of Jesus, that one can get *enough christology* out of Jesus, that one can get the *christology we need* out of Jesus. Other starting points will have to be supplied.

When Pannenberg rejects the from-below approach, he does so because he objects to the way it can authorize low christologies. Pannenberg is hardly alone.²⁰ Low, functional, and adoptionistic christologies have fallen out of

¹³Hans Schwarz signals this change in the discussion about the resurrection: “Wolfhart Pannenberg’s Retroactive Christology,” *AAR Christology Newsletter* I/No. 4 (November, 1981) 12-14; see also Braaten, “Christological Reflections,” 3; Driver, *Christ*, 8; and Teselle, *Christ in Context*, 9.

¹⁴Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* (New York: Macmillan, 1968) 398-403.

¹⁵Driver, *Christ*, 24.

¹⁶As examples of this recent criticism, consider: Francis S. Fiorenza, “Christology After Vatican II,” *The Ecumenist* 18/6 (September-October, 1980) 86-87; Driver, *Christ*, 28; Eugene TeSelle, “Emergent Issues in Christology,” paper presented at the Currents in Contemporary Christology Group, AAR Annual Meeting, San Francisco, 21 December 1981, 15-17.

¹⁷Pannenberg, *Jesus*, 33 and John Macquarrie, “Kenoticism Reconsidered,” *Theology* 77 (1974) 121.

¹⁸See, for instance, Braaten, “Christological Reflections,” 2; Thompson, *Jesus*, 16-17; and Peter C. Hodgson, who has been critical of the approach for some time: *Jesus Word and Presence: An Essay in Christology* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971) 68-69.

¹⁹Wolfhart Pannenberg, “Christologie und Theologie,” *Kerygma und Dogma* 21 (1975), 159-175.

²⁰Braaten, “Christological Reflections,” 2-3 articulates the connection between the from-below approach and low christologies. It is interesting to notice how Paul van Buren’s christology of *The Secular Meaning of the Gospel* represents the now-unfashionable reductionistic christology for many recent christologists. See: Elizabeth Johnson, CSJ, “The Christology of Wolfhart Pannenberg—Microcosm of Contemporary Currents,” *AAR Christology Newsletter* I/No. 4 (November 1981) 19. See also: Walter Kasper, *Jesus the Christ* (New York: Paulist Press, 1977) 18 and TeSelle, “Emergent Issues,” 12-16 for a critique of modern donatist christologies.

favor.²¹ During much of the middle period of this century Bultmann and others directed many christologists toward the effects of Christ on the individual or the community.²² Explicit in this direction was a rejection of the metaphysical, orientation of Protestant orthodoxy (and, of course, of the christologies of the creeds and councils). For others, especially Roman Catholic scholars, the great reconsideration of Chalcedonian dogma associated with Grillmeier, Rahner, Lonergan and others meant a liberation from traditional “above” categories.²³ Christologies now could find more room for Jesus’ humanity and the humanization he brings. Jesus the humanizer became the dominant image of an entire generation of christology.²⁴ When this image lived within the complicated hermeneutic of a Schillebeeckx or the transcendental program of a Rahner, it bloomed into the most attractive christology of its day. However, there are, I believe, signs of an alienation from the image of Jesus as humanizer, perhaps even from the fashionable view that

salvation is humanization.²⁵ In part, the concern is that the humanizer Jesus can become the merely human Jesus. Is not the theme of humanization so easily secularized that its Jesus can no longer bring salvation? How easily Jesus the humanizer becomes the Christs of the human-potential movement; and no one wants that. Post-critical, revisionist christologies seem much less entranced with the humanization motif than were Enlightenment christologies. They appear to have less trouble thinking about divinity—about divinity appearing—about divinity appearing in Jesus of Nazareth. Perhaps they are not impressed that humans have much potential; perhaps they sense that many people would like to be drawn away from their humanity. A divinizing christology may well have its day.

II. PLURALISM INTERNAL TO CHRISTOLOGY

The rejection of human-potential christologies brings with it changes in method. It is no secret that current christologists are seeking “from above” support for their work. Metaphysical concerns crop up in a study recently ruled by functional questions.²⁶ The trend is toward “higher” christologies, ones willing to risk ontological claims that would dizzy a Bultmann. Truth questions are re-

²¹With the exception of James D. G. Dunn, *Christology in the Making* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1980); but Dunn’s book purports to be a historical study and its adoptionism can be no more than a prolegomenon to christology proper.

²²One is reminded of both the liberation and the limitation of Bultmann’s famous question from “Das christologische Bekenntnis des Ökumenischen Rates,” (“Does it help me that he is the Son of God, or is he the Son of God because he helps me?”) in Kasper, *Jesus*, 22-23.

²³See: Brian O. McDermott, SJ, “Roman Catholic Christology Since 1960,” paper presented at the Currents in Contemporary Christology Group, AAR Annual Meeting, San Francisco, 21 December 1981, 2-5.

²⁴TeSelle, “Emergent Issues,” 1-9, where TeSelle scans the breadth of the image.

²⁵It is interesting that both TeSelle, *ibid.*, and Braaten, “Christological Reflections,” independently expressed the same disenchantment with the humanization mode at the same San Francisco meetings.

²⁶Kasper rightly declares the end of the functional and ontological split which had once divided christology; 23-24.

appearing.²⁷ This new spirit to christological reflection combines with the disenchantment toward the historical approach to christology. The effect of this alliance is to break open and pluralize the question of the starting point of christology. Gone is the confidence of a single starting in the historical Jesus. Küng stands all alone here among major christologists. Pannenberg now advocates something like a synthetic above-below approach. He would balance historical knowledge of Jesus against a beginning in philosophical anthropology.²⁸ Liberation theologies typically begin at least in the historical Jesus and in the concrete situation of faith.²⁹ The reigning option of the day is close to Schillebeeckx’s position: christology must begin with the historical Jesus within the plural witnesses of the New Testament and in an analysis of contemporary Christian experience.³⁰

Christologies today are not permitted to have a single emphasis. A christology that attends to the historical Jesus must seek out the primitive kerygma of the New Testament witnesses.³¹ No single New Testament witness can provide an interpretive canon for the others. A satisfactory christology, we are told, balances the pre-resurrection life of Jesus with the resurrection experience. Neither a Küng nor a Pannenberg finds this balance. Cross must have

resurrection, as much as a theology of the cross requires a theology of glory.³² Even cross and resurrection taken together need an incarnational complement.³³ Neither moment alone is satisfactory. The *already* of the salvation in Jesus must be held in tension with the *not yet*.³⁴ Transcendental skeletons seek historical meat.³⁵ Below approaches want foundations from above.³⁶ Historical-critical work on the sources and creeds must be supplemented by socio-critical work on the community in which a christology will live. Theoretical christologies are thought inadequate until they find a praxis.³⁷ When one surveys these requirements for a

²⁷One thinks of Tracy's analysis of the plural "experiences of a mediated immediacy of the event of manifestation in Jesus Christ" in *The Analogical Imagination*, 385ff.

²⁸See Johnson, "Christology of W. Pannenberg," 19-22 for a description of this change.

²⁹Consider the long and round-about discussion which brings Sobrino to the conclusion that there really cannot be one starting point for christology: Jon Sobrino, SJ, *Christology at the Crossroads* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1978) 1-12.

³⁰By the time that Schillebeeckx gets to *Christ. The Experience of Jesus as Lord*, 71-79, it is evident that he has no intention to start christology simply in the historical Jesus. For this most popular position, see: Fiorenza, "Christology," 81, 85; Sobrino, "Christology," 13; Kasper, *Jesus*, 21-22; Thompson, *Jesus*, 6 and so on.

³¹Again, the Schillebeeckx program is the most imposing example of this balance. But consider also the way that Tracy balances the elements in his "The Christian Classic I" of *The Analogical Imagination*, 248-304.

³²One thinks of the extensive discussion that greeted Moltmann when he offered *The Crucified God* after *The Theology of Hope*.

³³See Johnson, "Christology of W. Pannenberg," 19-22 for a discussion of a transition in the resurrection-centered Pannenberg toward a new interest in the incarnation.

³⁴Tracy assembles all the varieties of the already/not yet balance, *The Analogical Imagination*, 309-18.

³⁵See: Karl Rahner and Wilhelm Thüsing, *A New Christology* (New York: Seabury, 1980).

³⁶Kasper's refurbishing of the Catholic Tübingen tradition is the prime example of this balance; *Jesus*, 18-24.

³⁷See: Leonardo Boff, *Jesus Christ Liberator. A Critical Christology for Our Time* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1978) 43-46, among the many liberation pieces.

satisfactory christology, it is no wonder that a Schillebeeckx is working on his third massive volume.

For the first time there is no virtue in a clear, single starting point. Apparently, single starting points choke christology. Christologies must now hold on to several fundamental emphases. An adequate christology must touch as many of the bases as possible. It must at once start in several places. It must at once lean toward several orientations. For instance, no one wants to deny that the Jesus of the historical-critical method is of some use to christology. But by itself that Jesus is christologically thin; it seeks out the proclamation and manifestations of the resurrection community. The Jesus of the historical-critical method needs all the Christs of the New Testament. It probably needs the Christs of the history of Christian thought and practice and the definition of the creeds and councils. All the Christs which telescope out of the historical Jesus need to be framed for them to be intelligible and useful. A transcendental program of some kind and an analysis of the present experience of faith can frame the Christs of tradition. These frames, of course, open to a doctrine of God and a metaphysic which must be related to christology. Today one could even begin christology from a doctrine of God or from a metaphysic. Finally, the frames of a christology must be honed by a socio-critical analysis of the world in which a christology will be practiced.

If a christology must start in many places, if its emphases are several, naturally its method must be plural. Each starting point may require its own method, and every emphasis requires another expertise. Suddenly the question of the norm of christology is more complicated than ever. Current christology claims the necessity to be plurally normed. This situation is not a tragedy but an opportunity for a christology to present itself in a more adequate fashion. It can draw its measures from a range of philosophical, historical, and phenomenological supports. Christology is clearly internally pluralized, and the effect of the welter of starting points, methods, emphases, and norms is that hermeneutical and criteriological discussions now are central to the conduct of christology. Theologians must carefully chart their ways through all the potential paradigms. They must show that they can avoid the emptiness of a “repressive tolerance.”³⁸

The most remarkable development in contemporary christology is the sense that christology is accountable to practical starting points, methods, and norms. Christology is no longer a discipline of *theoria* alone. Christology is something one practices, a learned praxis. The current praxiological orientation implies a critique of certain christologies, notably those labelled “idealist”; that is, it opposes ones which respond to the first phase of the Enlightenment and seek a Christ who is the bringer of freedom and the explicator of consciousness.³⁹ The bondage of blindness, immaturity, and ignorance does not grip christology as it once did. Rather the problem which vexes christology is human systemic cruelty, and christology, as Sobrino notes, lives within the modern struggle for a theodicy.⁴⁰ Liberation is sought, and the central discus-

³⁸See Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination*, 305-38 for a posing of the hermeneutical and criteriological issues related to christology.

³⁹See Fiorenza, “Christology,” 82-83; Boff, *Jesus Christ Liberator*, 47; Sobrino, *Christology*, 27.

⁴⁰Sobrino, *Christology*, 35.

sion partners are the figures of the second phase of the Enlightenment. Marx is the major patron of current christology, even among those far removed from things Marxist.⁴¹ With his help christology can be recast into a disciplined overcoming of evil. The current praxiological orientation is, thus, hostile to christology as strict theological construction. But this hostility is not a hostility to intellectual work; it is a moral complaint. Too many christologies in the past have been naive to their own partisanship within the social and political structures of a society.⁴² *Christ the liberator* serves to transform those structures into just ones, and christology is a hermeneutic of learned practice. The question is no longer whether we can prove that Jesus rises from the dead; the question is whether we will be a party to the reign of justice which a resurrection promises.⁴³

The focus of concern for the resurrection of Jesus has clearly shifted. The question at hand is: what does a resurrection accomplish? What is promised, what vindicated in the resurrection of Jesus?⁴⁴ The significance of this shift is greater than it appears. When the Pannenberg argument for the event-character of the resurrection captured the discussion some twenty years ago, resurrection was chiefly the definitive confirmation of the history and message of Jesus of Nazareth. One moved one’s eyes from the resurrection back to that life which God approved. To be sure, the resurrection promised our resurrection and the coming of the Kingdom. But the major motif sounded in the resurrection was a completion and a vindication which had

constitutive significance for the doctrine of God and for a view of the nature of reality. Since Pannenberg, not completion, but *provisionality* dominates christological concern with Jesus. Provisionality, as I see it, is the clearest criterion to distinguish recent pluralist christologies from those of the early and middle years of the century. For most recent christologies, whatever is accomplished in Jesus of Nazareth is incomplete and looks to a fuller salvation yet ahead.⁴⁵ Jesus is a promise of things to come, but he cannot be said to embody everything that is to come.⁴⁶ It is routine now for christologists to seek to avoid absolutist claims for Jesus.

I sense three stages in the growth of concern for *the incomplete Jesus*. The first critiques of the absolute Christ respond to an early Enlightenment concern for freedom. A Jesus who wraps up the story of the world seems to conflict with our sense that freedom and history are real, that they matter to the way things

⁴¹Even Rahner now speaks of a “practicing christology”: Rahner and Thüsing, *New Christology*, 7.

⁴²Boff, *Jesus Christ Liberator*, 265.

⁴³Driver, *Christ*, 8.

⁴⁴See *ibid.*, but also Schwarz, “Pannenberg’s Retroactive Christology,” 13-14.

⁴⁵See Tracy again for a summary of the already/not yet tension in contemporary theology, *The Analogical Imagination*, 309-18.

⁴⁶The TeSelle paper can be read as a summary of the variety of ways in which recent christologies attempt to integrate an element of provisionality into christology: “Emergent Issues,” 9-21; see also: Burkle, “Christ of Realized Eschatology,” 1; Ruether, *Faith and Fratricide*, 234; Sobrino, *Christology*, xvii; Driver, *Christ*, 25, 29; and so on. The recent Rahner effort to reassert the absoluteness of the bringer of salvation is striking both because it is so awkwardly argued for and because it is so rare among recent christologies: *New Christology*, 7, 35.

come out for the world.⁴⁷ In a second phase, corresponding to the second phase of the Enlightenment, critics complain that an over-and-done-with salvation tends to serve vested interests.⁴⁸ The complaint, thus, is a prophetic one: only a provisional christology can dislodge the monied and the powerful.

III. PLURALISM AT THE CENTER OF CHRISTOLOGY

The third phase of the critique of the absolute Christ leads us out of pluralist moments internal to the discipline of christology. In this phase, scholars recognize that only a provisional Christ can allow Christians to tolerate other religions and orientations.⁴⁹ Only a provisional Christ allows serious discussion and growth. Christian exclusivism rooted in absolute claims for the Christ is morally intolerable and intellectually pre-pluralist.

If a historically conscious christology scrambles to bridge Lessing’s ditch, a plurally conscious christology seeks to juggle a favored ball among so many attractive others. The problem is not the absolute in relation to the historically relative, but the one amid the many, not the *once-for-all* character of the Christ but the *one-for-all* character of historic christology. The problem is with the singularity of claims for the Christ; the goal is to seek some form of a nonexclusivist christology. Naturally nearly all the internal pluralist steps must be presupposed for pluralism itself to become the agenda for christology. For instance, it is improbable that a christocentrist or someone who admits no provisionality into the Jesus-event will seek a non-exclusivist christology.

Pluralism becomes the explicit agenda of christology the minute a scholar makes

christological room for other traditions, other revelations. One type of making-room comes in any effort to create an inclusivist christology.⁵⁰ Many of these options are as old and familiar as Justin Martyr's doctrine of the *logoi spermatikoi*. They and others like them have recently reappeared with a passion. One version among inclusivist options, I believe, is to restrict the area in which the "one-for-all" language of traditional christology is allowed to function.⁵¹

⁴⁷See Dorothee Soelle, *Christ the Representative* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1967) 61-62, 103ff. and other Soelle works for this critique. See also: John A. T. Robinson, *The Human Face of God* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1973).

⁴⁸As in Sobrino, *Christology* xvi-xvii; Ruether, *Faith and Fratricide*, 79; and Soelle, *Suffering*, 22-28.

⁴⁹Burkle, "Christ of Realized Eschatology," 7; Ruether, *Faith and Fratricide*, 246; or John Hick, *God and the Universe of Faiths* (New York: St. Martin's, 1973) see the discussions of this theme in: Russell Aldwinckle, *Jesus: A Savior or the Savior? Religious Pluralism in Christian Perspective* (Macon: Mercer University, 1981); Gerald H. Anderson and Thomas F. Stansky, eds., *Christ's Lordship and Religious Pluralism* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1981); and the *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 35 (June, 1981), all of which is devoted to the question of religious pluralism and christology (John Hick, "Christology in an Age of Religious Pluralism"; James Moulder, "A Model for Christology"; Siggibo Dwane, "Christology and Liberation"; Martin Prozesky, "Christology and Cultural Relativity").

⁵⁰See Lucien Richard, OMI, *What are They Saying About Christ and World Religions?* (New York: Paulist Press, 1981) 45-56 for an overview of the several recent inclusivist options.

⁵¹As I see it, George Rupp's complicated position becomes this option: *Christologies and Cultures. Toward a Typology of Religious World Views* (The Hague: Mouton, 1974); Don Cupitt's essays, "The Finality of Christ," *Theology* 78/666 (1975) or "One Jesus, Many Christs?" in S. W. Sykes, ed., *Christ, Faith and History* (London: Cambridge University, 1972) drive toward a territorial position, as do John Hick's.

Some choose this route in a hard form: they argue that christological claims live doxologically within Christian experience and do not conflict with or even extend into non-Christian territory. A softer version is commonly known as "two-covenant" theology in Jewish-Christian dialogues.⁵² Dialogue is the touchstone of the inclusivist option. A second option, perhaps, even a second stage in the discussion, is a formalist one. In this approach the term "Christ" is identified, not finally with any historical particularity, but with a formal element which can contribute to all ways and religions. One thinks of Cobb's "creative transformation" and his recent concern for, not just genuine dialogue, but genuine cross-fertilization. Cobb, as is well known, seeks a Christian contribution to Buddhism and a Buddhized Christianity.⁵³ Mutual transformation appears as the theme of the formalist option. A third option, perhaps an extreme version of the formalist move, finds in the Christ that which opens Christians to other theologies and religious experiences.⁵⁴ The Christ is the pluralizer: With this option, the victory of the pluralist consciousness over traditional and modern christologies is almost complete.

⁵²See the discussion of these two-covenant theologies as they touch christology in John T. Pawlikowski, OSM, *Christ in the Light of the Christian-Jewish Dialogue* (New York: Paulist Press, 1982) 19-35.

⁵³John B. Cobb, Jr., *Christ in a Pluralistic Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975) and Cobb's lecture tour essay, "Can Christians be Buddhists Too?"

⁵⁴An example of this position is Robley E. Whitson, *The Coming Convergence of World Religions* (New York: Newman, 1971).