Returning the Mystery to God
The Theocentric Horizon of Roger Haight’s Christology

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The much discussed book of Roger Haight, S.J., on Jesus has occasioned praise and criticism. In this essay the author proposes that Haight has paved a path toward a Christology which is appropriate for an age that demands dialogue and respect among the world’s religions. By placing Christology within the context of the universal search for God, Haight has fashioned an apologetic for a pluralistic world.

And if it is a mystery, we too have a right to preach a mystery and to teach them that it’s not the free judgment of their hearts, not love that matters, but a mystery that they must follow blindly, even against their conscience. So we have done (Dostoyevsky, 32).

One of Roger Haight’s gifts to Catholic theology across many years of scholarship has been his constant interjection of a universal scope of concern. Religious pluralism and interreligious dialogue have never been secondary topics for him. Haight’s theological corpus pulses with a certain anthropological and historical urgency that is born of the signs of the times. Immersed as we are in massive amounts of existential human sin and suffering, situations which simply should not be, nobody from any religious tradition can afford to conduct tribal,

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theological business as usual. The problem of history compels those who share faith in God to talk to one another, and so work together toward the humanization of history. This project beckons even more urgently when human violence and division are revealed over and again to have roots in religious language and ideology.

**New Apologetic Demands**

When Haight’s long-anticipated contribution to the field of christology, *Jesus, Symbol of God* (hereafter, *JSOG*; all citations from this book throughout the essay will simply provide page number), was published two years ago, it was greeted with a blaze of commentary and some controversy. While everyone seems to agree that the work is impressive in its breadth and attention to Church tradition, there has been less than unanimous agreement about how to judge Haight’s constructive response to the central christological questions of our time. From its initial chapters on method, *JSOG* orients itself squarely within “the broadest theological conversation of interreligious dialogue that now characterizes our situation” (47). For Haight, the subject matter of theology “transcends Jesus Christ; it includes interpretation of all reality” (47). Christology has entered “a new phase in the history of Christianity,” he writes, “as it transpires within the context of global questions of mutual understanding among the religions and the demand to establish common ethical norms” (47). What has long been a footnote for many Christian apologists is Haight’s very point, or rather, horizon of departure.

That he grants other religious traditions such an honored place at the table has troubled some of his colleagues (Cavadini; Oakes), and evidently the magisterium. Dermot Lane may have anticipated the polarized response which would greet Haight’s book when he remarked: “The issues Haight raises will not go away, especially in view of the increasing multicultural and global character of the world in which Christianity now exists” (Lane, 381). Lane’s remark seems almost prophetic now, in what people are calling “a post–September 11th world.” There can no longer be any question that religious traditions today face unprecedented apologetic demands. The violent irruption and aftershocks of September 11, 2001, should forever prioritize the horizon that Haight encourages Christian theology to embrace as more than an afterthought.

With *JSOG*, Haight himself responds to this apologetic horizon, in part, by orienting christology within “an overall religious worldview that is theocentric, that is, literally, one in which God is the center of all reality, and not Jesus Christ” (206). The aim of the present discussion is to identify how Haight accomplishes this theocentric “shift” with resources in the tradition, and also to build a case for why it is necessary. I will discuss three premises that drive the soteriological
content of Haight’s christology. The first is anthropological; the second, theological. The third premise relates to mystery, and the question of whose authority obtains when addressing the mystery of God. In the concluding sections I will respond constructively to certain criticisms of JSOG in the form of a question: Does Haight leave us with a portrait of Jesus emptied of truth, meaning, and beauty? In view of the complexity of the book, the task here is purposefully selective, and may be characterized as a constructive interpretation driven by the conviction that JSOG lays down essential and trustworthy landmarks for christology.

**Premise I:**

*The Unity of Peoples Always and Everywhere*

Haight seems to be one of a minority of Christians (theologians included) who manages to reconcile both the historical fact and a theological appreciation of pluralism, while a great many seem content to keep “the other” in conceptual parentheses.

The discovery of pluralism is precisely a discovery of the “other,” other peoples who are different and valuable, but who are excluded or suppressed by the grand narratives. Can one interpret Jesus Christ as precisely God’s story which is so open to others that it does not co-opt 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? (333).

In his appropriation of pluralism—the non-Christian religious world, the thoroughly secularized world, and the pluralism within Christianity itself—what must not be overlooked is Haight’s insistence on maintaining a common anthropology, one that “links human beings and texts across time and cultures” (43). In other words, Haight refuses to concede postmodernity’s embrace of radical fragmentation and relativism. To the contrary, he adheres (one could say radically) to a hermeneutic that presupposes the essential unity of human beings in a common species, and the possibility of communicating meaningfully across cultural barriers. “To exist as a human being, is to exist in solidarity with other human beings, across time and into the future” (46).

This communication across barriers manifests in christology today—as it must in any discipline that seeks understanding—by way of what Haight, following Gadamer, calls a “fusion of horizons,” allowing other voices into a critical conversation from across traditions, cultures, and time. This method of correlation will, without question, render the project of christology not only open-ended
but also more nuanced and complex, and will “not overcome pluralism, but admit a variety of positions” (47). For Haight, the cost of a more open-ended christology is not too high if it purchases a genuine consubstantiality, an existential and theological solidarity, with all peoples of all time. As Dr. Martin Luther King often repeated, “We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny” (King, 290). Christians are not in God’s eyes a different breed of human being, nor should they be in their own.

The Roots of the Religious Question

But how is it possible to speak of a common anthropology in today’s intellectual culture, in which relativism is an epistemological premise and “the very claim for the existence of universal truth has become associated with a narrow, sectarian outlook” (188)? What binds people together across extraordinarily diverse cultures, colors, languages, and ages of history? The explicit universalism of Haight’s anthropology relies heavily on that of Rahner, finding in the structure of human existence itself a unifying principle across culture and time: human freedom.

The freedom of the human spirit is tied to the finite, concrete world through experience. Haight describes experience as dynamic and self-aware, both a “presence to oneself” and at once a “presence in the world.” But something else is revealed by the phenomenology of human experience. The sheer experience of being in the world is the very soil which births and nurtures the specifically religious question. Why? Because the self-consciousness that is the human spirit cannot escape the question of its own destiny (Blondel, 3–15, 425–46). All human beings question not only “where we are from, but also why? And what for?” (190). The roots of the religious question are therefore universal, arising in the first place from the positive dynamism of human freedom as it opens before the world.

But neither can human freedom escape a confrontation with sin, finitude, and death. Indeed, as “the great equalizer,” death levels humankind before its horizon of inevitability. More than any anthropological given, perhaps, death raises the question of God, the question of whether some ultimate goal or subject might finally transcend and complete human existence. The dialectic “between positiveness and negativity,” Haight writes, “between infinite longing and finitude, which is the metaphysical driving force of human action, is the source too of the religious question” (192). What binds us to all peoples of all times, then, is the religious

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question, intrinsically the question of salvation, which emerges within the structure of human existence itself. It is the free urge of the human spirit toward life and meaning, and the bumping up of that spirit against sin, despair, and death, realities that seem ever to mock and thwart us.

**Christology and the Religious Question**

One can begin to see the shape of a christology that will resonate in the heart of every human being who bears, even subconsciously, the religious question. Following what Haight calls a “genetic structure of understanding,” such a christology will be “first of all a history, a story, a drama” of a fellow human being, the Jesus of history, and the community that bodied forth his spirit and memory (40). As the drama of Jesus’ life—his exercise of freedom, his own spirituality—moves between the positivities and negativities of the world in which he lived, it throws open the religious question in a universally resonant and exemplary way. For all who would see and hear, the life of this man opens a door on the human longing for God, and God’s offer of salvation.

**Premise II:**

*God Is Always Readily at Hand*

While liberation theologians speak of the uncentering of the Church in the world, Haight in a certain sense uncenters Christ as an object or end of worship, and re-centers God as the source and summit of Christian life and imagination. Is Jesus the center of Christian faith? One can imagine, in Haight’s conception, Jesus himself urging today’s Church, “I must decrease. God and God’s reign must increase.” The primary justification for re-centering God in the Christian imagination is (and can only be) the witness of Jesus himself, especially the narrative of his life and teaching as related in the Synoptic Gospels. One may conclude on the basis of his Jewish identity and the Gospel narratives that Jesus’ own spirituality was theocentric.

Who, then, is the God encountered in Jesus? In Haight’s view, the God of Jesus is not substantially different than the God of Jewish tradition. In continuity with the Hebrew Scriptures, Jesus presents to the world “a God who is anthropocentric; God’s cause is the cause of human existence” (116). The God of Jesus is transcendent, but in Jesus’ ministry, one thing is clear: God’s transcendence is subversive, demystifying the present order, relativizing all “absolutes” that history creates. “When a transcendent God of justice claims one’s loyalty nothing else may stand in its way” (115). Still, the God witnessed by Jesus’ actions is disarmingly personal, seeking out the solitary lost sheep, the tax-collector in the tree-tops, the woman at the well.
The Nature of God as Provident Creator

And God is love. What Jesus adds to the Jewish (and the world's) image of God may best be measured by the degree and scope of God's love. The universalism of God's concern, Haight notes, is found in the Jewish Scriptures, but the matter was not settled. Jesus makes clear statements—love your enemy; imitate a Samaritan—on a debated issue. “There are no limits to concern or love for others; in fact, one should actively make oneself the neighbor of one's enemies” (109). Why? Because this is the way God relates to all human beings, sending rain on the just and the unjust. And because love is the desire toward unity, God is not merely transcendent, but immanent and close. “This closeness cuts through much of the formalism and ritual of religion: God is always readily at hand” (115).

If there is one statement that characterizes the imaginative impact of Haight's christology, this is it: God is always readily at hand. The emphases here may be found in the words “always,” which means to all peoples at all times, and “at hand,” which means close. God is close to all people at all times. It is God's very nature to create, to love, to save. As provident creator, God holds all creation as the ground of being itself (Matt 6:26-30). Jesus saves, in part, by revealing what already is. He illuminates God's mercy, closeness, and concern for human beings as constitutive of the very nature of God, everywhere, from the beginning.

Building on Rahner's principle of the unity of the orders of creation and salvation—and departing from his identification of the economic and immanent Trinities—Haight arrives at a place Rahner could not: “[As] the Jewish and Christian scriptures testify, God as Spirit has been present and at work in the world for human salvation from the beginning, without a causal connection to the historical appearance of Jesus” (456). The integral character of salvation means that it cannot be partial, but must comprehend the whole of life. This radical, seemingly infinite fusion of horizons is only possible within the logic of an infinite love.

Jesus and God as Spirit

What place, then, does Jesus have in God's infinite horizon of salvation? To appropriate the doctrine of Jesus' two natures, Haight turns to a thoroughgoing
Spirit christology, one that begins with God's presence as Spirit to Jesus of Nazareth (even as he is conceived in Mary’s womb). While it is not possible here to review the case for Spirit christology over against a traditional Logos christology, this much may be said. To encode a strong principle of distinction, as Haight does, between God as God, and Jesus of Nazareth as a human being, is not to impose a strong principle of separation between God and Jesus. God’s transcendence accounts for a profound distinction, not separation, between God and humankind, including Jesus. God’s immanence as Spirit, or grace, accounts for a profound unity between God and humankind, and especially in Jesus. This unity may be understood as an ontological unity, because “where God acts, God is” (455).

In a certain sense, by taking the logic of an infinite love to its furthest imaginative conclusions, Haight “explodes” the notion of God’s incarnation in a way that envelops all humanity. What Jesus experienced from the moment of his conception—God’s indwelling as Spirit, not a distinct entity, but God as God—so too, all human beings experience in an analogous way. Jesus reveals what dwells as a potency in all: a life not overtaken by God, but empowered by God as Spirit; a life in which freedom is sustained by grace over against the profound reality of sin; a life which grows “in wisdom and age and favor before God and man” (Luke 2:52).

In arguing for a recovery of Jesus’ humanity, that he is literally “like us in all things but sin,” Haight illuminates christology’s impact on spirituality. Jesus Christ must be met in the Christian imagination face to face, as it were, near enough to follow. An adequate christology engenders a life of Christian discipleship, the aim of which is not orthodoxy so much as fidelity, courage, and love; not worship of Christ so much as imitation. Its handbook is the Sermon on the Mount, with its focus not on Jesus but on the listener—“You are the light of the world.” If Haight’s christology redirects the spotlight from Jesus to God, it also turns a spotlight back upon the hearers of the word, those who encounter Christ and are faced with a decision. Whether today or two thousand years ago, the question to be decided in this fusion of horizons is not only “Who do you say that I am?” but “Will you follow?”

Premise III: God Is a Mystery, Doctrines Are Not

Human beings are created not to serve religion, but to serve the mystery of God and the values of God’s reign. If human beings are spirit, or freedom, in the world, then religion serves human freedom, as timbers feeding the fires of love, justice, and compassion. When this dynamic is understood, the Christian may begin to view religious pluralism not only as a given, but as a positive value.
within the plurality of cultures. This *a priori* confidence has little to do with political correctness, and everything to do with one’s image of God.

The logic of God’s infinite love will not permit persons—so long as they live and pray and breathe in the warmth of this horizon—to feel their own relationship to God “weakened by the fact that God loves others and deals with them in specific historical ways” (413). In fact the Christian case “is strengthened and confirmed: the universal love of God that is experienced by Christians is, as it were, manifested in other religions” (413). There would seem to be a paradoxical interplay of God’s immanence and God’s transcendence at the heart of most, if not all, religious experience.

**The Limits of Doctrine**

In the final analysis, however, it may be God’s transcendence that leads disciples of any religious tradition toward, if not a positive valuation of other religions, at least a more humble view of their own. It is precisely before this infinite horizon that human beings confront and measure their own finitude, contingency, smallness. God’s absolute mystery—meaning the incomprehensibility of God as God—really does, as Haight writes, demystify the present order and relativize all “absolutes” that human beings create. This includes religion and religious doctrine. The encounter with transcendent mystery leads to “the healthy agnostic sense of what we do not know of God” (417).

Religious doctrines are human formulations meant to shed light on an originating, historical experience of salvation. Unfolding within a genetic structure of understanding, they are not ends or absolutes, but means toward life in God. The doctrine of the Trinity, for example, “is a product of historical development over centuries; that development is confusing, but it is no mystery” (479). With responsibility to history, then, and before God’s absolute mystery, Haight demystifies the notion that Trinitarian doctrine was “there in the beginning . . . and only needed time to be discovered” (473). What was there in the beginning was God. Because doctrines were patently not there in the beginning—because they are not God—they do not command worship. Therefore, they may be critically understood and adjusted by the Church; indeed, the apologetic task requires it when doctrines no longer communicate effectively, or even distort, the deeper soteriological truth about God, the “one thing necessary,” that lies below their surface.

**The Costs of Religious Idolatry**

The alternative, of course, is to reify religious doctrines, which is to confuse them with God as God, the mystery toward which they point. Though Haight doesn’t use the term himself, the biblical name for this temptation is idolatry, and religious idolatry is certainly no stranger to any religious tradition. The Bible itself, or a particular doctrine—the Trinity, for example, or Mary as *Theotokos*—
may be operating as an idol in the Christian imagination to the degree it functions as an object of worship. Like God, it may be seen as immutable, even when it confounds intelligibility. The parish priest bumps up against this dilemma at least once a year when he preaches on Trinity Sunday. Is it not evident, as Haight suggests, that certain Christian doctrines have reached a saturation point in credibility in the postmodern context?

Intelligibility, however, is but the first victim of doctrinal idolatry. For if religious doctrines are themselves mysteries, the people of God will need scores of experts to explain them. They will require a complex hierarchy of ecclesial translators, scribes, and institutions whose sacred purpose is, in the words of Dostoyevky’s Grand Inquisitor, to “guard the mystery.” So long as they remain convinced that the mysteries of God are beyond their own reach, the masses will happily defer all matters of spirituality to the authorities. “[They will bring to us all the most painful secrets of their conscience—all—and we shall have an answer for everything” (Dostoyevsky, 35). Thus Dostoyevsky identifies the second casualty of religious idolatry, what Johannes Baptist Metz calls “the authority of all believers and the theological dignity of all humankind” (Metz, 108).

In this model of ecclesiology, the Church becomes little more than a mystery cult, a source of mystical fascination, perhaps, but with rather feeble standards of discipleship. For what is sacrificed here, even as the Israelites bowed to a golden calf, is the spirit of freedom and dignity identifying the children of God. This is not the freedom to simply do as one pleases without reference to any principle of human authority. It is, rather, the freedom to take what has been written on tablets of stone and allow it to be inscribed upon one’s heart. It is the freedom to participate in one’s own salvation, not ceding personal or communal responsibility to a beautiful, but handmade, idol. It is the dignity of interiority, conscience, and creaturehood, which ultimately require of every disciple an ongoing existential response.

While it is a terrible thing to relinquish one’s freedom before an idol, at least it is one’s own to give. But religious idols often demand more than freedom. Sometimes they require blood. It is not necessary to recount here a history as old as religion itself, and all-too-palpable in a “post–September 11th world.” But one thing is abundantly clear: people will spill the blood of others, and their own if necessary, to defend the idols—religious, economic, ideological—that hover over

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their life and consciousness. “It's not the free judgment of their hearts, not love that matters, but a mystery that they must follow blindly, even against their conscience” (Dostoyevsky, 32). The third casualty of religious idolatry is peace.

The Theological Dignity of All Humankind

By moving to demystify christological and Trinitarian doctrine, Haight orients christology more humbly within the soteriological horizon—God's boundless horizon—mediated by other world religions. In sum, Haight cedes the mystery of God back to God. Doing so, of course, implicitly involves wresting it from the exclusive domain of those who guard the mystery: the magisterium and the academic theologians, himself included. Like Rahner, Haight constructs a theology in which he himself, in a manner of speaking, disappears. As a so-called expert, he has no more privileged access to the mystery of God than ordinary, theologically “illiterate” men and women.

The Church is not a mystery cult, but a reign of God project. It is not the mystery of an inaccessible Trinitarian Godhead that Haight guards, but the mystery of God's indwelling as God in the life of human beings always and everywhere, and superlatively in Jesus. The shepherds and theologians of the Church speak with authority to the degree their language effectively mediates the Spirit of God, and so mobilizes human freedom toward love. Good preaching (or apologetics) follows the pattern of Jesus’ own teaching, always striving to render the symbols of faith intelligible and empowering to ordinary people. Christology must go “beneath a mere reliance on religious authority and... open the doors of the religious question inside the autonomously human” (436).

How? Both the theology of grace and its christological kin, Spirit christology, underscore what Metz calls “the natural competence of all human beings in matters concerning God” (Metz, 111). When christology adheres to a genetic, or narrative, structure of understanding, ordinary people recognize analogues in their own experience in the story of Jesus, and how Jesus bears God's salvation. The horizon of God's infinite love opened up by the encounter with Jesus moves the Christian to trust the authority and theological dignity of all humankind. “Wherever there is love, there is God” (1 John 4:7). In the deepest recesses of the human heart, where “human beings finally remain anonymous and enigmatic even to themselves” (Metz, 113), God as Spirit ever draws freedom toward the more of life and self-transcending love.

With its emphasis on the primacy of Christian spirituality and discipleship, Haight's theology again echoes that of Dr. Martin Luther King, who put the matter rather succinctly: “You don't have to have a college degree to serve... You only need a heart full of grace, a soul generated by love” (King, 265).
human love obtains in a thousand hidden places, over against a profound horizon of sin and suffering, that may be properly called a mystery worthy of the name of God.

**The Blessedness of Responsibility**

While he was speaking, a woman from the crowd called out and said to him, “Blessed is the womb that carried you and the breasts at which you nursed.” He replied, “Rather, blessed are those who hear the word of God and observe it” (Luke 11:27-28).

This brief encounter in Luke’s gospel captures the imaginative impact of Haight’s christology. In what appears to be a gentle but decisive way, Jesus moves the woman’s attention away from himself, and toward God and God’s desire for humankind. Even more to the point, his response to the woman has the effect of shifting the burden (and the blessedness!) of responsibility from himself, and putting it more squarely on her shoulders. In doing so, Jesus reverses the logic of the woman’s expectations as she looks upon him, presumably as the Messiah. He seems to be keenly aware of, and resistant to, the likelihood that he—perhaps also his mother Mary—will be made by his followers into an idol. Such an eventuality would short-circuit the very freedom he hopes to awaken and empower in people.

The subject of christology is not only Jesus Christ or the mystery of God. Ultimately, we are the subject of christology, that is, all those who hear the story of Jesus and are faced with a decision. Even more expansively, whatever is said about the salvation offered in Jesus bends back not only upon Christians who speak it, but also on the whole of humankind. So writes Metz (109), paying homage to Rahner’s theology:

> [For] Rahner, God is a universal theme, a theme concerning all humanity, or it simply is no theme at all. God is never for him the private property of the church, nor of theology. And not even of faith: the lightning flash of God is to be reckoned on every human experiential and linguistic terrain (Metz, 109).

The “human terrain” at the center of Haight’s christology is freedom. Freedom binds us to human beings of every color, creed, language, and culture; it binds us to Jesus Christ, who is like us in all things but sin. The community of Christians called the Church must be a sign for the world—against the charges of the Grand Inquisitor and all he may represent—that it is the free judgment of our hearts, it is love that matters, and not simply a mystery that we follow blindly, even against our conscience. This is not a retreat into Pelagianism, since it is
God’s gracious Presence that creates and empowers human freedom toward love: not I, but the Spirit or grace of God within me.

**Merely a Human Being?**

In putting a certain priority on Jesus’ consubstantiality with human beings, does Haight empty the gospel of its most profound truth about him? In his criticism of *JSOG*, John Cavadini accuses Haight of reducing Christianity’s central claim “to a statement that even an atheist can affirm” (Cavadini, 23). It seems to me, however, that an atheist might sooner accept a one-time incarnation of “God,” or singular in-breakings of some transcendent “Life-Force” into human consciousness. Haight, in fact, confronts the atheist with a much more radical claim. God’s incarnation, or indwelling, is not rare but as common as life itself. While distinct and “wholly other,” God is not therefore far away. God dwells in the fabric of being, as common as life, love, self-transcendence, and compassion.

In the end, I wonder if the criticisms of Cavadini and others do not hide a deeper concern, a lament for what is perceived to be the impending death of beauty in the Christian creed. Do we not drain Christian belief of its luminous beauty and scandalous truth when we adhere so strictly, as Haight does, to the demands of historical consciousness and intelligibility? “If Jesus is merely a symbol,” Cavadini writes, “I have no burning reason to invest the time and energy it takes to pass this faith on to children. . . . I see no particularly urgent reason to take up my cross and follow a symbol (or even to teach for one)” (24). Well, one might add, who would? But it would have been closer to the heart of the matter to put the question this way: “Will I take up my cross and follow Jesus if he is merely (or truly) a human being?”

Behind the high christology of Cavadini’s position there appears to lurk a correspondingly low conception of the human person, that is, one that Jesus has not really changed. To be sure, this is a traditional weakness of christologies which begin “from above” and conceive Christ first of all as a pre-existent divine being who “descends” into history. High christologies tend to conceptualize a great distance between God and humanity, and, by extension, between Christ and humanity. Indeed, within the imaginative fabric of descending christologies, Jesus is God, for only true God can bridge the chasm of sin and effect salvation for a fallen humanity. Cavadini’s position represents the rejection of any christology that has the appearance of bringing Jesus down to our size.

**Ultimately,**

we are the subject of christology.
The Divinization of Humanity

But what Haight is doing, in fact, is raising the human up to Jesus' size. Following Paul's classic image of Jesus Christ as the last Adam (Rom 5:12-21)—so also figures throughout the tradition, such as Irenaeus, Origen, and Theodore of Mopsuestia—Haight's centering conceptual image is the divinization of humanity, with Jesus as exemplar and revealer of God's salvation. What Jesus is, we are revealed to be. For Haight, this is the whole point of the incarnation and the heart of the Christian message. As the final Adam and "the firstborn of many," Jesus is the archetypal human being, "who did what Adam should have done but failed, and he did it in the new situation of sin and death which surrounds the present epoch" (159). "And since this christology emphasizes the human character of Jesus, he remains imitable. One can identify with him and follow him" (456). The profound beauty in this soteriology is not monopolized by the figure of Jesus, but may be located in the freedom of every person who strives, even before the negativities of human existence, to live a life sustained by the Spirit, a life of absolute fidelity to God's will. Such a life ends in resurrection and glory close to God.

But the hope engendered in Paul's (and so Haight's) soteriology is not merely a hope for individual salvation. Where Adam's act of disobedience places humankind under the control of the powers of sin and death, Jesus' act of obedience fully reveals—and so "opens" anew, or "pioneers"—the way for the fulfillment of God's purpose for humankind. Christ reveals an expansive promise of salvation that encompasses all reality, an eschatological promise to restore the original pattern of creation and of history. Thus Jesus, the New Adam, "stands at the head of a race of people who in this world can live lives transformed by hope in the absolute future" (159).

No longer may we retreat into a fundamentally base view of human nature, or a negative fatalism with regard to the future. Jesus changes forever what we know about ourselves, about what is possible in cooperation with God's empowering Spirit, and about what to expect from God in the end times. In this sense of engendering hope both for today and for the final liberation of history from sin and death, Jesus may be seen as the progenitor of a new creation, one who ushers in a new race of human beings. By now, however, it should be clear that this new race cannot be conceived of as merely the Christian race. He stands, as it were,
ahead of the entire human race, always and everywhere. This universal lens on salvation is required not only by the logic of God’s infinite love, but also by the doctrine of creation, a doctrine too often ignored or marginalized by christology.

Among other things, the doctrine of creation out of nothing means that God is immediately present to all finite reality and thus to human beings. This means that Jesus Christ should not be understood apart from or over above creation, but precisely within the framework of creation. In the final analysis christology is “concentrated creation: belief in creation as God wills it to be” (Haight, 392 quoting Schillebeeckx, 128).

What distinguishes Christians, then, from others? The Church is first of all the community of those who remember and follow the way of Jesus Christ, the pioneer of salvation, the New Adam, the “firstborn of many” (Rom 8:29). And because Jesus reveals God to us, the Church is, in the words of Juan Luis Segundo, the community of those who know the universal plan of salvation (32), and who continue the causality of Jesus’ revelatory salvation by drawing others into its circle of impact. As a sign-bearing community the Church publicly bears the knowledge that ultimately our trust in God’s love will not be shipwrecked.

The point is that we know that this trust is well-placed. We know that it is placed in good hands: i.e., that there is Someone who has responded with a yes and that this gesture is not lost in a void. We are those who “have believed in love,” as Saint John says, because we know the name of him who is the origin and object of all love (Segundo, 57).

Conclusions

There is no question that for many people, the heart of Christianity’s meaning and beauty is captured in John’s prologue, and its poetic identification of Jesus with God. Is Cavadini not correct in insisting that this very identity comprises the wonder, the joy, the confounding good news of the one and only Incarnation? Even to the degree the answer may be yes, one must still ask whether it has always been so. Is Haight not right to remind us that the earliest Christian witnesses found salvation from God in Jesus of Nazareth—“bone of my bone, and flesh of my flesh”—and no other? Why should we require more? Should not we, too, be able to recognize God’s own beauty, truth, and even salvation in the life and witness of a human being?

This can only be so if God as God does not remain transcendent, but is fully united with humanity, and so shares in our lot. Spirit christology affirms this datum of faith absolutely. Haight’s turn to Spirit christology lays a foundation...
upon which others may build narrative christologies that seek to communicate the gospel effectively in today’s horizon. But by turning the Christian imagination again toward the Synoptics (and a pluralism of New Testament christologies), Haight throws light on interpretations of Jesus that already render him near enough, and beautiful enough, to follow.

For truly, the person Haight asks us to follow is not a mere human being, but a full human being, a free human being, a human being fully empowered by the revolutionary Spirit of God. When we encounter Jesus of Nazareth, surely we will see God’s presence shining through more perfectly, more efficaciously, more beautiful than in any other. Even looking on the babe, lying in a manger, do we not behold the glorious potency of love and life that shines from the face of every newborn? In the case of the infant Jesus, of course, the whole world now looks upon him with full knowledge of the beautiful human life that will come to pass. From our place in history, then—and this was also true of the gospel writers—we may truly behold *the imago Dei* in Jesus from the very beginning, as actuality, not just potency.

But whether or not we respond to the actuality of God’s presence in Jesus (and in ourselves) is in great measure up to us. Faith is first of all an existential response to God. Will we, like Jesus, live into the fullness of our own God-image and so become divinized, taken up finally into life with God? Will we respond to God’s inviting and transforming presence as Spirit in our lives? “Blessed are those who hear the word of God and observe it.”

To call Jesus a “symbol,” as Haight does, is an epistemological way of highlighting the participation required when we consider Jesus, and the necessary tension created in the imagination by the formula “true God, true man.” Symbols activate the mind because their meaning does not lie on the surface. One has to find meaning in multiple, even conflicting meanings. As a symbol Jesus fully mediates God’s very presence—Christ is, first of all, a sacrament (Ogden, 166), a parable or gesture of God’s love for humanity—but not in a way that bypasses human cooperation. To engage this point, one has only to recall that many people chose not to follow Jesus. Truly, if looking at Jesus meant seeing God literally, in an unmediated way, then who could choose *not* to follow? But for those who approach him with the question of salvation,
Haight affirms that “Jesus is the reality of God” (455). Jesus saves human beings who say “Yes,” who allow the narrative of his life to mobilize their own in love, discipleship, even martyrdom. Otherwise, Jesus may be little more than an idol, a source of mystical fascination, or a reason to gather with friends on Sunday.

Finally, what may be said about the method employed in JSOG? Is it trustworthy? Even if one grants to Haight all the urgency of the postmodern horizon, does he overstep necessary limits in his critical reinterpretation of doctrine? In an earlier book, he comments on the freedom that obtains in doing theology when one is faithful to both past and present:

> The more one is critically responsible to tradition, the more one is free to interpret the meaning of that tradition for contemporary understanding. Critical knowledge of the past liberates us from bondage to the past. “The present,” Dulles writes, “helps us to liberate ourselves from the tyranny of the past, and the past, to escape the idolatry of the present” (Haight, 1990, 234, quoting Dulles, 183).

There can be little question that JSOG strives to be critically responsible to tradition. But equally compelling and trustworthy is the rootedness of Haight’s method in what he calls the problem of history, the existence of vast amounts of human suffering and oppression, of fated and un-free existence. Haight’s theology is never far from this horizon. In a word, he appears incapable of letting himself be consoled by myths (Metz, 81). This inability gives his theology, in my view, significant credibility, and a certain urgency that is well-founded today.

In the end, JSOG successfully keeps alive the narrative of salvation, and does so in a way that does not leave human beings merely passive before it. It casts salvation itself in comprehensive terms, before God’s infinite horizon of mystery and grace. By returning mystery to God, Haight brings the Christian’s self-understanding more fully in existential and theological solidarity with all humankind, always and everywhere. By itself, this infinite fusion of horizons represents an expansive Christian vision worthy of joy. It is good news about God and humanity! From the darker side, to the extent Christians share the responsibility for a human history shattered by division and violence, Jesus, Symbol of God lays hopeful foundations for new directions in the field of christology.

**Endnote**

1 Fr. Haight, currently at Weston Jesuit School of Theology, has been asked not to teach by the Vatican’s Congregation for Catholic Education, while a “dialogue” with the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith continues. Parts of the recent apostolic letter “Dominus Iesus” could be read as a near direct refutation of his constructive

References


