

## Introduction

*What do you have that you did not receive?* It seems to me that most of the most important parts of my life are things that have happened to me, rather than things I have done. I did not choose to be born when and where I was born; I did not choose to be raised by the people who have raised me; I did not choose to be brought up in the Christian faith, or to be baptized. Yet, had any of these things been different, it seems to me that I would have been an unimaginably different person.

Consider: my understanding of the cosmos and the infinitesimally small piece of it within which I live my life; my understanding of the possibilities of human nature and our ability to move freely on land, sea, and air, or our ability to manipulate the forces of nature through technology; my hopes for my own life, and estimation of the paths open to me – so much of the unquestioned background of my life would be unrecognizable in any era but the turn of the third millennium *anno domini*. But again, at a much more fine-grained level: The way I speak, what I find funny, my personal tics, my faults in character, the things and people I love – all these seem to me more things I have been given than things I have achieved. It is unthinkable to me that I should have ended up the person that I am without having lived in a particular time and a particular place, without having been raised by my father and mother and alongside my brother, without having married the person I love, without having been surrounded by the friends and teachers and mentors who have in fact surrounded me throughout my life.

The situation is even more dramatic when one considers the possible events that have not – but might have – occurred within

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my life: being born into fabulous wealth or crippling poverty, childhood disease, the early loss of those I love, disability, any of the traumas of abuse or loss that can mark the entirety of one's life, finding myself in the midst of calamity or war. To a significant extent, my life has been made what it is by factors beyond my (in some cases, anyone's) control; it is something I have received, something I have been shaped by, not (or not mostly) something I have fashioned. And it seems to me that the same is true also for you.<sup>1</sup>

It is not that our volition and choices are meaningless. On the contrary, even taking into account the constraints that the circumstances of our lives place on their courses, a fantastic range of possibilities lies open to us. My agency, exercised within the specific contexts within which my life has unfolded, has shaped me to my very deepest levels: I would not be the person that I am had I not made certain choices about the company I keep, the ways I spend my time, and the things I value and believe. At times, these actions and patterns of action suggest a particularity or a shot of originality proper to my createdness that allows me (and you) to step beyond the limits of our social formation, a novelty that shows we are not simply passive products of external forces acting upon us.

At an inescapable level, however, the fact remains that even my volition is in great part responsive to the social world I inhabit. The activities I enjoy; my tastes in food, drink, and entertainment; the

<sup>1</sup> We are in this together, you and I; or at least I would like to think we are. A natural question, of course, is who is included (and, accordingly, who is not included) in this "we." In answer, I can do no better than Bernard Williams, who at *Shame and Necessity*, 171 n.7 writes: "The best I can say is that 'we' operates not through a previously fixed designation, but through invitation . . . It is not a matter of 'I' telling 'you' what I and others think, but of my asking you to consider to what extent you and I think some things and perhaps need to think others"; Bernard Williams, *Shame and Necessity* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2008). Ideally, this dialogical "we" would be capacious enough to include even those readers who are hostile to my theological aims here, and who are rightly suspicious of how my "we" encodes the limits of my ability to know and love God and the world truly, to the detriment of others. My hope is that while this "we" will undoubtedly be at times more coercive than I intend and more blinkered than I can see, it also offers a true invitation to be corrected.

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material goods I desire; the vocations I can imagine myself pursuing and my notions of the good life – all these have been profoundly influenced by the people around me, the histories in which I am enmeshed, the time in which I live. My desires, even what I want to want, have been cultivated by my relations to what is outside me, and not always for the better: My view of the world and my agency within it have been shaped powerfully by racist and patriarchal social orders, and a host of other affective deformations are attributable (to a greater or lesser extent) to features of my upbringing or the influence of others. The importance of this receptivity to the world within my life is so evident as to be inextricable from my personhood itself – to be a human person is at least in part to stand in relations of this kind, to be determined in certain respects by who and what surrounds me. What indeed have we not received?

This is, I suggest, a constitutive feature of human existence. This is what it is to be a temporal, changeable, social, embodied, thinking, and loving creature. Our lives are given their shapes through our relation to the world in which we find ourselves, both our natural environment and the other people we encounter. To have the singularity of our lives shaped through our interdependence with and vulnerability to others is simply part of what it is to be the sort of creature God has made us. We might, following Hans Frei, call this personal singularity our “identity.” In contrast to more philosophically freighted terms like the “self” (with its emphasis on interiority, volition, and reflexive consciousness), “personality” (with its embedded psychological assumptions), or even “numerical identity” (with its existential implications), the term “identity” as I employ it here simply indicates whatever marks a human off as particular, all the characteristics and patterns of action that make up one’s particular way of inhabiting the world.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> So Hans W. Frei, *The Identity of Jesus Christ: The Hermeneutical Bases of Dogmatic Theology* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1997), 95: “Identity is the specific uniqueness of a person, what really counts about him, quite apart from both comparison and contrast

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The fundamental claim of this study is that if the Word became truly human, then Jesus Christ also became who he is – assumed his human identity – through the contingent and unpredictable events of life, through his relations to those around him, through his relations to the whole of the created order. Christ’s humanity is like ours: “When we consider the flesh, there we find Christ, and in Christ we find both him and ourselves.”<sup>3</sup> From all eternity, the Word wills to be the Christ, but he *becomes* the Redeemer in time.<sup>4</sup>

If Jesus Christ is *vere homo*, then at the feet of others he learns obedience and grows in wisdom as he is nursed at the breast of the Blessed Virgin Mary, inherits and is included within the history of Israel in his circumcision, converses with the doctors of the Law in the Temple, is baptized at the hand of John, is confessed to be Lord by Peter, meets the Syrophenecian woman, finds his friends sleeping in Gethsemane, is betrayed by his companion Judas, teaches about himself on the road to Emmaus, appears to Stephen and to Paul, is praised in hymns by Ambrose and contemplated in his suffering by Julian of Norwich, is acclaimed and worshipped in our own time – all of this marks the man Jesus Christ; all this determines him as the particular human he was and is; and it is, at least in part, *through* these very social and contingent acts that we are freed from the power of death and restored to fellowship with God. The influence of others and the effects of creaturely causes are indispensable in his coming to will as human the salvation of the world, and in his enactment of this will by giving himself over to suffering

to others . . . A person’s identity is the self-referral, or ascription to him, of his physical and personal states, properties, characteristics, and actions.”

<sup>3</sup> *en.Ps.* 142.3; WSA III/20, 347.

<sup>4</sup> The sense in which Christ becomes the Redeemer parallels Frei’s description of the achievement of Christ’s identity at *The Identity of Jesus Christ*, 146: “The glimpse we are provided within the story of Jesus’ intentions is just sufficient to indicate the passage of intention into enactment. And what is given to us is neither intention alone nor action alone, neither inner purpose alone nor external circumstance alone. Rather, he becomes who he is in the coincidence of his enacted intention with the train of circumstances in which the story comes to a head.”

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and death. Human agency and finite causes are thus included within the providential ordering of God's saving work, and granted a place within the actualization of our reconciliation with Her.<sup>5</sup> Redemption does not occur without this creaturely agency and causality, and so we must understand them – our lives, the life of the world – in their inner unity with Christ's life.

To do so, we will attempt to think with and beyond a theological vision that is staggering in its scope and complexity, drawing together trinitarian theology, theological anthropology, soteriology, and ecclesiology; a theology frequently overlooked in standard

<sup>5</sup> The custom of writing about God without employing gendered pronouns has largely superseded the tradition of using exclusively masculine pronouns in academic theology. The case that exclusive use of masculine pronouns functions idolatrously to signify God as more properly male than female has been ably prosecuted by Elizabeth A. Johnson, in *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse*, 10th Anniversary Edition (New York: The Crossroad, 2002). Yet I worry that the avoidance of gendered pronouns in theological writing may tend toward a different error: that of depersonalizing God, rendering the lively God of Abraham and Sarah somewhat inert and abstract. The God we encounter in Jesus is a God who knows us, loves us, and desires to draw us into relation with Herself. What's more, the God whom we meet in Christ is a God in whom all human particularities find their origin and to whom they exhibit a likeness – and yet, one who infinitely exceeds those particularities, and all our language. It is to Christ (I will argue in this study) that all these creaturely likenesses point, and through the very particularities of our lives that Christ's life achieves its complete redemptive shape, as the unknowable God is made known in him. For this reason, I refer here to God irregularly using both masculine and feminine pronouns, as well as, occasionally, nonbinarily gendered pronouns (for instance, *Ze* or the singular *They*). Denys Turner explains the logic of this practice at *The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 26: "If we describe God both as male and as female, then we force upon our materialistic imaginations a concrete sense of the collapse of gender-language as such . . . It is in the collapse of ordinary language, brought to our attention by the necessity of ascribing incompatible attributes, that the transcendence of God above all language is best approached." Changing irregularly between the gendered pronouns used of God has the virtue of disrupting normatively male theological speech, while making the intrinsic disruptiveness of God-talk apparent in its form. It is my hope that this practice, distracting as it may be, serves a pedagogical practice even in the distracting. To facilitate clarity in light of this decision, I have also adopted the convention of capitalizing the initial letter of all personal pronouns used to refer to God.

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narratives of christological development, and so far less utilized within contemporary systematic theology than its generative possibilities would suggest: St. Augustine of Hippo's theology of the *totus Christus*, the whole Christ.

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It is tempting to portray the whole history of modern christology as an attempt to discern how we might understand Christ, true God and true human, to be implicated in creaturely contingency and human society. From at least Reimarus onward, and accelerating with the publication of D. F. Strauss' *Life of Jesus* and the kenotic christologies of the nineteenth century, modern christology has wrestled with what we might call the problem of the "historicity" of Christ – not the question of reconstructing a historical Jesus, but the question of how christology should regard the significance of history and Jesus' social context. To ask after Christ's historicity in this sense is to ask: What is Christ's debt to Jewish legal thinking, or the apocalyptic tradition of prophecy? How does Christ's ministry reflect his Roman imperial context? Are the ecosystems and environment of Galilee relevant to how we understand Christ's redemptive work? How should recognition of Christ's human inheritance of evolutionary processes shape how we regard the significance of the Cross?<sup>6</sup> The fundamental question of Christ's historicity – the through-line that connects all these subsidiary questions – is

<sup>6</sup> Throughout this book, I have employed somewhat idiosyncratic capitalization procedures to assist in making several different theological points. When predicating some term of God substantially – predicating some attribute of the simplicity of the divine life – I have rendered this in capital terms, though if I am simply ascribing a quality to God as a creaturely likeness, I have not. For instance: God is good, but God is also the Good. I have capitalized pronouns referring to the divine life of the Word, but have not capitalized pronouns referencing Christ as one divine-human person or the Word's human life, in recognition of the Word's humility in assuming the *forma servi*. I have also capitalized some terms of art referring exclusively to particular moments of the Word's temporal life: So I will speak at times of the Incarnation or the Cross, but will not capitalize constructions with a general referent subsequently particularized like "the incarnation of the Word" or "the cross of Christ."

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this: How should we understand the union of divinity and humanity in Christ, as well as his redemptive life and ministry, in light of the relations to the created order within which he is implicated?

Rather than providing a historical overview of attempts to answer this question, let me offer instead a brief survey of the contemporary christological landscape, identifying four strategies for addressing the problem of Christ's historicity. I do not aspire to offer a detailed map of all the contemporary christological proposals on offer; rather, I hope to chart some of the currents I take to be animating christology at the present time, thus allowing me to situate my own approach within the broader discipline.

My first two strategies map roughly onto the familiar distinction between "christologies from above" and "christologies from below." Yet even here, it is not as simple as marking off the differences between theologies that begin from a "divine Son" or from a "human Jesus"; indeed, many of these contemporary christological proposals explicitly seek to overcome such an opposition of "from above" and "from below." Rather, my first two strategies are identified through attention to where they locate categories like historical becoming and relationality that are needed to account for Christ's historicity.

"Christologies of human relation" – here, roughly, "christologies from below" – foreground the social, political, and cultural context Christ inhabits and its effects upon him.<sup>7</sup> Thinking Christ's historicity here means seeing him as human profoundly implicated within the social and symbolic worlds of his day. This is frequently accomplished by taking research on the "historical Jesus" as the starting point of christological reflection, as, for instance – in markedly

<sup>7</sup> Cf. F. LeRon Shults' account of the development of the category of "relation" in theology and philosophy at *Reforming Theological Anthropology: After the Philosophical Turn to Relationality* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2003), as well as Mayra Rivera's attention to "flesh" as a site of liberatory mutualistic relation at *Poetics of the Flesh* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015).

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different ways – in the work of John Hick, Roger Haight, Jon Sobrino, M. Shawn Copeland, and Elizabeth Johnson.<sup>8</sup>

This christological trajectory has significant theoretical virtues: Of the four strategies I will consider, this first approach has arguably had the greatest success in taking on board the insights and accounting for the christological complexities introduced by modern historical research on Christ. What’s more, it has demonstrated how attention to historical study of Jesus can function as a way of recovering theological awareness of Christ’s creative and often subversive engagement in the oppressive sociopolitical structures of the Ancient Near East. Following Christ is thus acknowledged to entail participation in contemporary struggles for liberation from the dominative structures of our own day. All this is, in my judgment, theologically salutary.

Yet there are also potential limitations to this strategy. Most basically, it is not always clear how these thinkers correlate attention to Christ’s implication in the social world with his divine identity. The methodological turn to the “historical Jesus” as a starting point for christology is often complemented by a critique of the categories of classical christology: substance,

<sup>8</sup> *The Myth of God Incarnate*, ed. John Hick (London: SCM Press, 1977); John Hick, *The Metaphor of God Incarnate: Christology in a Pluralistic Age* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005 [1993]); Roger Haight, *Jesus, Symbol of God* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999); Jon Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator: A Historical-Theological Reading of Jesus of Nazareth*, trans. Paul Burns and Francis McDonagh (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), 36–66; M. Shawn Copeland, *Knowing Christ Crucified: The Witness of African-American Religious Experience* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2018), and M. Shawn Copeland, “Meeting and Seeing Jesus: The Witness of African American Religious Experience,” in *Jesus of Galilee: Contextual Christology for the 21st Century*, ed. Robert Lasalle-Klein (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011), 67–84; and Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Creation and the Cross: The Mercy of God for a Planet in Peril* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2019), 64–112. While Copeland and Johnson (and, to a lesser but nevertheless still significant extent, Sobrino) share a methodological starting-point with Hick and Haight in historical Jesus research, I take them to be far more successful in maintaining a Chalcedonian theology, and hope that the present project serves to supplement and nuance their christological proposals.



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person, nature, and so on.<sup>9</sup> Yet without these categories, it can be unclear how the rich and historically situated picture of Jesus should be theologically related to the Second Person of the Trinity. Sobrino, for instance, at times seems to speak of two subjects in Christ: a human person with his own proper existence but whose life is inseparably bound to that of the Word.<sup>10</sup> Charitably, this suggests that Sobrino's account requires further development if it is to close off the possibility of a Nestorian interpretation – and such development will likely require exactly the christological categories (or parallel ones) that Sobrino had previously critiqued. One finds no such unclarity in Hick and Haight, by contrast; yet precision about the relation between Jesus and the Word at the expense of confession of Christ's divinity. For Hick and Haight, confession of Christ's literal divinity suggests a form of "docetism": to the extent that is the all-knowing and all-powerful God, he cannot be truly human; and if Christ is truly human as we are, we cannot in any "literal sense" say that he is God.<sup>11</sup> Nothing in this first strategy leads inevitably to this endpoint, of course. It does, however, suggest that those seeking to think Christ's historicity while maintaining the teachings of Chalcedonian orthodoxy may encounter difficulties if a starting point in historical research on Jesus goes unsupplemented by a more robustly developed technical christological language.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Jon Sobrino, *Christ the Liberator: A View from the Victims*, trans. Paul Burns (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001), 242–243.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Sobrino's statement at *Christ the Liberator*, 223: "the limited human is predicated of God, but the unlimited divine is not predicated of Jesus."

<sup>11</sup> The denial of a "literal sense" of Christ's divinity is found at Hick, *Metaphor of God Incarnate*, 12. Of Hick, Herbert McCabe has written, "For Professor John Hick, it is all rather simple: He writes as though no one had hitherto observed the oddness of ascribing two natures to Jesus"; McCabe, "The Myth of God Incarnate," *New Blackfriars* 58.687 (1977): 350–357, 352–353. John Cavadini has similarly critiqued Haight's theology as encoding a "principle of separation" into christology; see John C. Cavadini, "Jesus, Symbol of God," *Commonweal* 126.17 (1999): 22–24.

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A second strategy, “christologies of divine relation,” draws the categories of historicity – especially personhood, becoming, and relationality – into the divine life itself. As such, this christological outlook tends to operate (though not invariably so) “from above.” This strategy encompasses attempts to rethink the ontology of divine personhood through the category of relation (Catherine LaCugna, John Zizioulas); often relatedly, social trinitarian theologies that view the divine essence itself as composed of the relations between the three persons (Colin Gunton, William Hasker, Jürgen Moltmann, Cornelius Plantinga, Richard Swinburne); theologies that draw historical becoming into the divine life itself (Robert Jenson, Wolfhart Pannenberg); and theologies which view the divine life as itself a process of becoming (John Cobb and David Ray Griffin, Catherine Keller).<sup>12</sup> Though quite diverse, this strategy takes the category of relation as central to the divine life: either an incredibly strong sense of the relations obtaining between the trinitarian persons, or an understanding of the relation between God and the created order in which some part of (in this case, usually Christ’s human life) or the whole of creation are definitive of the life of God.

<sup>12</sup> See Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *God For Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (San Francisco, CA: HarperCollins, 1991); John D. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1985); Colin E. Gunton, *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991); William Hasker, *Metaphysics and the Tri-Personal God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017); Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom: The Doctrine of God*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1993 [1980]); Cornelius Plantinga, Jr., “Social Trinity and Tritheism,” in *Trinity, Incarnation, and Atonement: Philosophical and Theological Essays*, eds. Ronald J. Feenstra and Cornelius Plantinga, Jr. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989): 21–47; Richard Swinburne, *The Christian God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994); Robert W. Jenson, *Systematic Theology, Vol. 1: The Triune God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), and *Systematic Theology, Vol. 2: The Works of God* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1999); Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology, Vol. 1*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1991 [1988]); John B. Cobb, Jr. and David Ray Griffin, *Process Theology: An Introductory Exposition* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1976); Catherine Keller, *On the Mystery: Discerning Divinity in Progress* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2008).