

God Incarnate

Explorations in Christology

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INTRODUCTION

This volume deals with a cluster of central doctrinal problems concerning the person of Christ. I have chosen to do so via engagement with a number of theologians, past and present, all of whom are concerned with what we might call classical Christology, that is, Christology pursued within the dogmatic boundaries set by the great ecumenical symbols (i.e. creeds) of the Church, including the so-called ‘definition’ of the person of Christ found in the canons of the Council of Chalcedon of AD 451. But this book is not an exercise in historical theology. It is an attempt to offer a constructive account of a number of central dogmatic issues in Christology that are the subject of ongoing discussion amongst theologians.

This study is also an exercise in *analytic theology*. By this I mean the method used to scrutinize the subject matter of each chapter involves deploying some of the techniques and rigour of current analytical philosophy in order to make sense of properly theological problems. Some theologians seem to think that analytical philosophy suffers from a certain intellectual myopia, focusing in on particular issues with such intensity and logical rigour that the organic whole is sometimes lost in the pursuit of the minutiae of a given argument. This need not be the case, and I hope that the treatment of the issues contained in this volume offer some reason to think analytical *theology* does not necessarily suffer from such short-sightedness, even if some analytical philosophy of religion might. In fact, the reverse may be true: such a theological method might provide one useful way of making clear certain interconnections between different aspects of theology as parts of an organic whole. Still, the theologian could be suspicious that analytic theology is a philosophical, rather than a theological exercise.¹ But this need not be the case. The use of certain philosophical apparatus does not govern the theological conclusions reached in the chapters of this book, nor does it motivate the discussion. Rather, the theological issues under scrutiny are made clearer using methods borrowed and adapted

1. I have set out what analytic theology may and may not entail in ‘On Analytic Theology’ in Oliver D. Crisp and Michael Rea, eds *Analytic Theology, New Essays in the Philosophy of Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

from philosophy for a theological purpose. In my way of thinking, one of the principal tasks of analytic theology is to provide a theological method that makes clearer the ‘internal logic’ of a particular doctrinal matter. In this way analytical theology (again, on my construal of this term) is primarily, though not exclusively, concerned with what might be called a procedural, rather than substantive use of reason, where the deliverances of reason are subordinate to, and in the service of, a particular theological end.² Hence, this is a modern instance of a venerable theological method, where a particular philosophical tradition and the tools it has to offer are used as a handmaid to theology. Or, to coin a phrase, analytic theology is (or at least, can be) an instance of a faith seeking understanding programme of theology.

I hope, by examining the cluster of problems in Christology that make up this volume, to ‘road test’ analytic theology as a way of approaching particular doctrinal questions in Christian theology.³ However, what follows is not merely a series of closely connected but distinct studies in Christology; it is not offered as a collection of methodologically related essays. This book is united by a common methodological concern. But it is also a step along the way towards setting out a comprehensive account of the main contours of Christology.⁴ Most of the issues I have focused on here are either dogmatically central to the doctrine of the Incarnation, or are matters raised by what we might call core-commitments of Christology, such as the relationship between Christ’s human nature and our human natures with respect to the question of when a human embryo becomes a human person – a problem discussed in the fourth chapter, after considering the dogmatically prior issue of the viability of the virgin birth. This is also true of several chapters that tackle matters that reflect some current concerns in the analytical philosophical–theological literature on Christology, which have roots deep in the tradition. Here I am thinking of the seventh and eighth chapters, which address the question of materialist accounts of human persons and classical Christology, and whether multiple incarnations are possible – this last being a matter that is considered in the tradition by St Thomas Aquinas, amongst others. In this way, I have tried to indicate the virtues of analytic theology, by showing how the analytic theologian might deal with some central topics in Christology and with several matters that commitment to classical Christology raise, pertinent to contemporary theological discourse.

2. I owe the distinction between ‘substantive’ and ‘procedural’ uses of reason to Paul Helm. See his *Faith and Understanding* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997), ch. 1.

3. I suppose one could have an analytic Jewish theology, or an analytical Islamic theology. But as a Christian theologian I am responsible to the Christian community, not to the communities of other religious traditions, though Jewish and Muslim theologians may wish to make use of similar analytical methods.

4. The first step along this road was taken in my *Divinity and Humanity: The Incarnation Reconsidered* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007) which is also a piece of analytic theology, although I did not speak of it as such there.

I have said that this is a book that engages with classical theologians and the Christology of the catholic creeds and deploys an analytic theological method to that end. It is also worth pointing out that this mode of doctrinal engagement is commensurate with what John Webster has recently called ‘theology of retrieval’. He says “‘Retrieval’, then, is a mode of theology, an attitude of mind and a way of approaching theological tasks which is present with greater or lesser prominence in a range of different thinkers, not all of them self-consciously “conservative” or “orthodox”.’ He goes on to suggest that one important characteristic of theologies of retrieval is that they treat ‘pre-modern Christian theology as resource rather than problem’.⁵ This certainly fits with the strategy employed here. As a theological method analytic theology need not be a theology of retrieval – the two terms are not co-terminus. It is possible to do theology in this analytical mode and be much more revisionist in outlook than this book is.⁶ But my own theological sympathies are in many respects very similar to Webster’s account of theological retrieval.⁷

Finally, this book is offered as a piece of *Reformed* analytic theology that is engaged in theological retrieval. Like an increasing number of historical theologians and systematicians, I do not think the term ‘Reformed Catholic’ is an oxymoron; far from it.⁸ This book is an attempt to set out one way of thinking about a cluster of issues in Christology through the lens of Reformed thought in particular. But it is also engaged with the wider catholic (i.e., ‘universal’, and, in this book, primarily western) tradition to which Reformed theology belongs. Hence, in addition to the foregoing, it could be said that this book is an exercise in ecumenical theology of a certain sort – a theology that is, I hope, a properly ‘generous orthodoxy’.

5. John Webster, ‘Theologies of Retrieval’ in John Webster, Kathryn Tanner and Iain Torrance, eds *The Oxford Handbook of Systematic Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 584 and 585 respectively.

6. As I have indicated in ‘On Analytic Theology’. One recent Christology that is both ‘analytic’ and in some respects more revisionist than that offered here is Marilyn Adams *Christ and Horrors* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), which repays careful study.

7. Webster places a wide range of current approaches to theology under the umbrella term ‘theologies of retrieval’, not all of which are mutually reinforcing, or even compatible. Nevertheless, he thinks that theologies of retrieval can be characterized by, amongst other things, theological realism (there is a divine reality to which we can and do refer); indebtedness to creedal orthodoxy and classical theology; the recognition that theology ought to be properly ecclesial; and recognition that the norms of theology are established by the object of theology, that is, by God, not by some discipline outside of theology, for example, the natural sciences. See Webster, ‘Theologies of Retrieval’, p. 584. This is very much in keeping with the analytic theological method used here.

8. The Reformed tradition was an historic attempt to reform catholic Christianity, which is why it is perfectly appropriate to speak of ‘Reformed Catholics’. For this reason, I am wary of talking of ‘Catholics’ as opposed to ‘Protestants’. There are catholic Christians: some Catholics are Romans (i.e. Roman Catholics); others are Reformed (i.e. ‘Reformed Catholics’). And, of course, there are other ecclesial bodies besides these, such as the Lutherans and the Orthodox, which are also catholic, in the sense intended here.

1. *The Shape of Things to Come*

The format follows what might be called a traditional dogmatic ordering of Christological topics. The first chapter deals with questions of authority and method in Christology. Theology is often divided into two broad categories: natural and revealed. Here I am concerned only with the latter. Christology is not a subject that natural theology has very much (if anything) to contribute to;⁹ it is a concern of revealed theology, since only via revelation can we know that Jesus of Nazareth was God Incarnate. But given that this is the case, how should theologians weight different sources of authority, and different witnesses to this divine revelation? In this chapter I offer an account of how different sources of authority should be weighted when dealing with matters Christological – although the reasoning here has application beyond Christology to other theological topics as well. Scripture is the ‘norming norm’ in all matters concerning revealed theology, but there are subordinate norms, like creedal and conciliar statements, as well as confessional statements and the work of particular Doctors of the Church that have to be accounted for. I also offer some discussion of the place of reason and experience in revealed theology. It seems to me that theology that fails to wrestle with the tradition as well as scripture is in some important sense defective. By giving an account of how the theologian might think about the different sources of testimony to which she must appeal in considering the subject matter of Christology, I hope to show how the theologian can deal with the tradition and scripture responsibly and with respect, as well as in a manner that displays appropriate critical engagement with the data of revelation. Although analytic theology does not commit one to this particular model of dealing with authority in Christology, I think it is a way of dealing with these matters that will be appealing to those engaged in constructive systematic theology, and is consistent with an analytical-theological approach that is understood in term of a ‘theology of retrieval’. The second part of the opening chapter turns to consider ‘high’ and ‘low’ Christology as well as Christologies said to be ‘from above’ and ‘from below’. I argue that there is a need to get a clearer understanding of these terms, and that Christology should begin with the data of revelation and the creeds, taking into consideration the findings of biblical criticism, but using the tradition as a ‘control’ on what is considered theologically acceptable biblical scholarship.

The second chapter considers the question of the election of Christ. This is a subject that has been much discussed in contemporary theology, in the wake of Karl Barth’s reformulation of the doctrine of election in his magisterial *Church Dogmatics*. Often discussion of this matter within the Reformed tradition is cast in terms of either a traditional Reformed doctrine of election, as per Calvin and his intellectual progeny, or a revisionist account of election, such as

9. Although see Adams, *Christ and Horrors*, ch. 1 for a rather different view.

that offered by Barth. In this chapter, I argue that this polarization is mistaken. As recent historical scholarship has demonstrated, there was a vigorous debate about the doctrine of election in Post-Reformation Reformed theology, and a variety of views on the matter tolerated within Reformed confessional thought. Barth's account of election may be seen as one recent way of rethinking this doctrine from within that tradition. But it is not the only creative way of thinking about the doctrine. Focusing on the election of Christ and the place of Christ's election in the ordering of the divine decrees, I set out a moderate Reformed position on this matter, drawing on the Post-Reformation discussion in an attempt to set out a contemporary account of the doctrine that is rooted in the Reformed tradition, remains cognizant of the carefully circumscribed doctrinal plurality that characterized that discussion and manages to say much that seemed important in Barth's account, without commitment to his revisionist views about the problems into which he thought Post-Reformation theology descended.

In the third chapter, we turn to the doctrine of Christ's pre-existence. I begin by outlining one construal of the traditional account of this doctrine. With this in mind, I then turn to consider the account of Christ's pre-existence recently set out by the American ecumenical Lutheran theologian, Robert Jenson. In his *Systematic Theology*, he offers a novel way of construing the pre-existence of Christ, which, I argue, is not wholly satisfactory. The main problem underlying what he has to say on this matter is that Jenson, like a number of contemporary Protestant theologians, thinks that theology must be done in the teeth of philosophical thinking, which has tainted systematic theology. It seems to me that Jenson's take on the role philosophy has played in theology is contentious, and skews his treatment of Christ's pre-existence in important ways. I suggest that a more traditional account of Christ's pre-existence that has a more positive approach to western metaphysics (Jenson's 'Olympian-Parmenidean religion') would succeed where Jenson's account fails. This sort of positive approach is, of course, part of my larger commitment to analytic theology, although one need not be a partisan of analytical theology to agree that Jenson's disparaging of the role philosophical metaphysics may play in theology is mistaken.

The fourth chapter deals with the Virgin Birth. This doctrine has been the subject of considerable discussion in modern theology, and a number of prominent theologians and biblical scholars have rejected it. I set out a version of the doctrine that follows one particular strand of the tradition, whilst updating it to take account of contemporary biological advances. (This means distancing my account of the Virgin Birth from some aspects of one influential reading of the Virgin Birth, namely, the reading of St Thomas Aquinas.) In the process of setting forth one version of a traditional doctrine of the Virgin Birth, Emil Brunner's attack upon the doctrine is also dealt with. I contend that Brunner is right to claim the Incarnation does not require a virgin birth, but wrong to think that the Virgin Birth is false. Then, at the end of the chapter, I turn to St Anselm of Canterbury, and his account of the 'fittingness' of the Virgin Birth. It seems

to me that with certain qualifications, St Anselm's way of thinking about the Virgin Birth is a positive and helpful contribution to Christology.

As already mentioned, the fifth chapter is a kind of theological *excursus*, or pause in our treatment of central dogmatic issues in Christology to consider what the ethical implications of one particular view of Christ's human nature – mentioned in setting out the argument of the chapter on the Virgin Birth – might be. I argue that commitment to a particular way of thinking about Christ's human nature that maintains Christ had a human body and rational soul, and that he was a complete human from conception, has important bearing upon what we think about the development of human embryos, and the vexed bioethical question of whether embryos are human persons or not. These are difficult ethical questions and I do not presume to have offered a solution to all the aspects of the matter that are currently pressing concerns in bioethics. But this does show that certain dogmatic and metaphysical commitments have ethical implications that it is incumbent upon the theologian to think through with care and sensitivity. And I also think that the argument offered here is a good Christological basis for thinking about the development of human embryos – which may help inform discussion of this matter amongst Christian ethicists.

Chapter 6 offers an account of Christ's impeccability. A number of recent scholars, including a number of theologians sympathetic to Chalcedonian Christology have shied away from the idea that Christ is impeccable, that is, incapable of committing sin. In order to retain a robust account of Christ's humanity – specifically, that he was like us in every way sin excepted (Heb. 4. 15) – these theologians have thought it important to claim that though Christ was without sin, he was capable of sinning (i.e., was sinless but not impeccable). The supposed virtue of this weaker account of Christ's sinlessness is that it means Christ really struggled with sin; he really could have succumbed to temptation, though he did not. I argue that this weaker account of Christ's sinlessness has undesirable theological consequences and requires the theologian to make adjustments to the doctrine of God that many will find unacceptable. Moreover, the traditional view, that Christ is impeccable, is perfectly capable of incorporating the idea that Christ really felt the pull of temptation, and yet resisted. Hence, the traditional view is able to deliver all that the weaker view of Christ's sinlessness promises, without the need for changes to the doctrine of God.

Chapter 7 deals with the important recent literature that has developed in various branches of theology in response to work being done in the philosophy of mind: an increasing number of theologians are dissatisfied with a traditional account of the metaphysics of human beings, claiming that humans are not normally composed of a body and soul, rightly related, but are material beings which have no immaterial substance distinct from the matter of which they are composed. I set out what materialism concerning human beings requires and then ask whether this is consistent with classical Christology, according to which Christ is composed of a human body and a 'rational soul'. It turns out

that there are plausible renderings of a materialist account of human persons that can make sense of this requirement of classical Christology. I set forth one such account, and argue that this version of materialism does not entail Apollinarianism, the heresy according to which the human nature of Christ consists of a human body, the divine nature taking the place usually occupied by a human soul. This means that at least one way of thinking about materialism with respect to human persons avoids an obvious theological error and appears to be creedally orthodox – although I myself do not endorse materialism about human persons. Yet I think there is merit in placing more than one account of the metaphysics of human persons at the disposal of theologians, which other divines might usefully explore. This is also an example of the way in which attention to particular doctrinal claims in classical Christology can throw new and unexpected light on an area of considerable theological and philosophical debate in the current literature.

The eighth and final chapter deals with the question of multiple Incarnations. There are several ways in which this might be a problem for the traditional doctrine of the Incarnation. First, it might be thought that Christ is only one of several, or perhaps many, divine incarnations, or divine avatars. If this is true, then the traditional claim of religious exclusivity that is implied by the doctrine of the Incarnation is jeopardized. Alternatively, it might be objected that Christ's Incarnation does not have cosmic significance. Christ might atone for the sin of human beings on this world, but this says nothing about possible life on other worlds, and their salvation. Finally, it might be thought that the Incarnation is too restrictive. What is there to prevent God from becoming Incarnate more than once? And why only in a human being – why not an ass, as some medieval theologians argued, or, perhaps, an ape? And, if it is somehow important that the Word of God is Incarnate as a human being, why should he become incarnate in only *one* human being? Why not the entire race? The Anglican theologian Brian Hebblethwaite has addressed some of these problems. He has done much to defend the traditional account of the Incarnation in his long and distinguished career. In this chapter, we shall assess to what extent his argument against the idea that there might be multiple Incarnations is successful. I argue that his analysis fails: there is reason to think multiple Incarnations are metaphysically possible. However, there are also reasons for thinking that as a matter of fact there is only one Incarnation – reasons having to do with the suitability of this particular arrangement.

In a short afterword I commend analytic theology as a powerful means by which to make sense of theological problems such as those considered in this book.

Chapter 1

CHRISTOLOGICAL METHOD

For I do not seek to understand so that I might believe; but I believe so that I may understand. For I believe this also, that 'unless I believe I shall not understand' [Is. 7. 9].

St Anselm of Canterbury, Proslogion I

All theology involves dialogue. It is a conversation in which contemporary theologians are in dialogue with each other, their intellectual forebears, the confessions and creeds of Christendom and Holy Scripture. How one weights these different sources of authority, indeed, whether one thinks of all these as sources of authority, is also a matter of debate. This is a question of theological method, usually thought to belong to the prolegomena of systematic theology. However, something should be said at the beginning of a book like this about *Christological* method. To the extent that the question of authority arises for other theological *loci* and for theology as a science (i.e., as an organized body of knowledge, a *wissenschaft*), it also arises for Christology as a particular aspect of theological science. One might think that, because Christology is so central to Christian theology, the issue of authority for Christological statements is even more pressing than it might be for other doctrines that may be thought to be less central to the Christian faith, or less definitive for the content of Christian theology (e.g., the mode of baptism, or marriage; the former is arguably less central, the latter is arguably not definitive for Christian theology – it is an institution shared with other religious traditions and the state). So, we shall begin by considering the question of the weighting of these different sources of authority, and their bearing upon the formation of orthodox Christology.

Having laid out some parameters on this issue, I shall then turn to consider problems with Christological method that have been raised in the recent literature, focusing my attention on the terms ‘high’ and ‘low’ Christology and the related phrases, Christology ‘from above’ and ‘from below’. Making sense of how the theologian engages Scripture and tradition is an important methodological consideration about what we might call the trajectory of Christology, where it begins and where it is headed. Such issues are logically prior to substantive questions pertaining to this doctrinal *locus*, such as whether the two-natures doctrine of the hypostatic union is coherent or not, or what we mean by terms like ‘person’, ‘nature’ and so forth.

1. Weighting Authority

1.1 Holy Scripture

I take it that Holy Scripture is normative for all matters of faith and practice, and therefore, for all matters doctrinal. It is the *norma normans*, that is, the norm which stands behind and informs all the subordinate ‘norms’ of catholic creeds, or the confessional documents of particular ecclesial traditions. I will not enter into the difficult issue of the inspiration of Holy Scripture here. It is sufficient for our purposes to see that in the history of the church, Scripture has been regarded as revelation. This too is an ambiguous statement. Is it that the words of the original autographs of Scripture are revelation? Or are the propositions we can find in Scripture, or derive from Scripture, revelation? Or is Scripture the vehicle for revelation, the means by which the Holy Spirit brings about an event of revelation to the reader of Scripture now, as he or she reads the record of a previous event of revelation (where the written record of that original revelation is not itself a revelation), as it was experienced by the apostles and prophets who penned the Scriptures? Or, perhaps, it is revelation in some other sense – perhaps God somehow ‘owns’ the whole message, although not necessarily every word, written down in Scripture by the apostles and prophets and delivered to the saints, and, through the work of the Holy Spirit, Christians come to see this. In which case Scripture as a whole is revelation, although it does not necessarily follow from this that each word, phrase or proposition derived from Scripture is itself revelation. This is rather like an author who regards the motion picture adaptation of her book as a faithful representation of the whole work even though some plot details may have been omitted or altered.

For our purposes, we will not need to decide which, if any, of these views represents the truth of the matter, important though this undoubtedly is. All of the positions just alluded to (and the different views I allude to are not necessarily mutually exclusive or exhaustive) represent what we shall call *high views of Scripture*. They all share a reverence for Holy Scripture and regard it as the particular place in which God now reveals himself to his people. Those who share such a high view of Scripture think that the fact it is the particular place in which God reveals himself to his people sets it apart from all other sorts of literature. Even great works of art such as Shakespeare’s tragedies, or Homer’s *Iliad*, though ‘inspired’ in some sense, and classic examples of their particular literary genres, cannot be said to have the property ‘being the particular place in which God reveals himself to his people’. They are not works in or through which God reveals his plan of salvation to those who seek him. This is true even if we think God may use particular examples of literature to inspire us, or to motivate us to act in certain sorts of ways. It is even consistent with the notion that God may take up certain human literary creations and ‘own’ them as part of his special revelatory work in or through Scripture. This is just what we find occurring in Acts 17.28, when Paul, in his speech to the Athenian

Areopagus, uses a phrase from the pagan Cretan poet Epimenides in order to make a particular point about an unknown god some of the religious Athenians worshipped. Rather than undermining the distinction between the special revelatory status of Scripture and other sorts of literature, this underlines the fact that there is a distinction to be made between the sort of writings God somehow superintends, in order to convey a message revealing something about the nature of salvation, and those sorts of writings God enables human authors to write, but where God does not superintend the writing process in such a way as to convey a particular message about the nature of salvation to his people that constitutes a divine *revelation*. God may be said to be involved in the bringing about of both sorts of writing. But in the first, he so superintends whatever is written that what is conveyed is either a report of revelation, which God may then use as the basis for an event of revelation today, or is itself something that conveys, or perhaps contains, propositions that are revelation. This cannot be said of the works of Shakespeare and Homer, which contain no trace of any divine intention to convey through the works of these authors something about himself or his message of salvation.¹

In short, God may be said to enable certain authors to write the most beautiful or profound literature. But revealing something about God or something about the nature of salvation is a rather different matter and requires a correspondingly different literary output. Here the difference is rather like that between an author taking a creative writing workshop where he helps those present to produce their own pieces of work, and a situation in which the author conveys a message to a particular person, asking them to commit it to paper for him and pass it on to posterity as *his* (i.e. the author's) message.²

There are other views of Scripture that may be said to have a certain reverence for Scripture, but do not regard Scripture as the particular place in which God reveals himself to his people. Such views are not high views of Scripture, in the sense I am using that term here. So, for instance, if someone were to say that Scripture is a collection of wise sayings and teachings gathered over hundreds of years by sages, prophets and religious teachers for the edification of the church, this would not be sufficient to count it as a high view of Scripture as I am using the term – indeed, probably, as most theologians use the term. Those who deny that Scripture is either (a) a divine revelation of what is otherwise unknown, or (b) the particular place wherein God reveals himself and his

1. How then are the works of Shakespeare or Homer said to be inspired, as previously asserted? In this sense: that they convey certain deep truths about what is sometimes called, rather misleadingly, the 'human condition'. Naturally, God brings it about that these works contain such truths as they do, including deep truths about the human condition. But this is qualitatively different from thinking of these works as in some sense revelation, or the locus of divine revelation.

2. Gavin D'Costa has suggested to me that this sounds rather more like an Islamic doctrine of revelation than a Christian one. But this image of the author and his amanuensis need not be thought of in terms of a dictation theory, which I would certainly want to resist.

message of salvation to his people through the work of the Holy Spirit, do not have a high view of Scripture in this fashion. They may have great respect for Scripture, just as I have great respect for the works of Shakespeare or Homer. But respect for a piece of great literature falls far short of regarding that piece of literature as a divine revelation, or the vehicle for divine revelation, even if it is particularly insightful, or conveys truths that are said to be ‘of universal’ or ‘enduring’ significance.

In what follows, we shall assume a high view of Scripture. But we will not need to commit ourselves to one particular high view of Scripture. This is a deliberate strategy, with the intention of attracting a wider sympathetic readership than might otherwise be the case were we to commit ourselves at the outset to one particular high view of Scripture. Nevertheless, there are limits to a properly catholic approach to theology. Hence, the approach envisaged here also excludes certain revisionist accounts of Christology. If a particular theologian begins with the assumption that Scripture is not, strictly speaking, anything more than classical literature of its type (whatever that is), and is subject to the same sorts of literary, historical and critical considerations attending other sorts of classical literature, then this will inevitably have an impact upon what that theologian thinks about Scripture’s portrayal of the person and work of Christ.

Conversely, theologians who have a high view of Scripture will approach issues in Christology with certain assumptions about what we can know about the person and work of Christ. This is true even if, as I suppose, most modern theologians who hold to a high view of Scripture are happy to use the tools of historical biblical criticism to make sense of the origin and formation of the biblical canon. However, this does not necessarily mean that a theologian with a low view of Scripture (‘low’ in the sense of regarding Scripture as classic literature but not as divine revelation) will inevitably end up with a correspondingly ‘thin’ or meagre Christology. But it would be fair to say that those who take a low view of Scripture tend to adopt Christological views that are sceptical about many traditional dogmatic claims concerning the person and work of Christ. Similarly, those with a high view of Scripture tend to develop a Christology in keeping with this, which is invariably much less sceptical about traditional dogmatic claims about the person and work of Christ.

There are those in the Christian tradition who have held a high view of Scripture, but ended up with an unorthodox Christology. For some this is because they have understood Scripture to be teaching things contrary to the catholic faith, such as that Christ was not God Incarnate. For others this is because they have exercised certain critical views about which parts of the canon convey the truth of the gospel, and which do not and should be rejected.

This latter view might be consistent with a high view of Scripture if one thought that Scripture was divine revelation but that not all the books in the canon were divine revelation. Perhaps some canonical books have been mistakenly or maliciously included in the canon by certain religious authorities.

Then one would think it important to ‘weed out’ those books that did not correspond to the pure doctrine of divine revelation one found in certain canonical books, but not others. This is consistent with a high view of Scripture, even if it is a procedure that, in the case of theologians like Marcion in the early church, leads away from orthodoxy.³

Theologians who have held both a high view of Scripture and unorthodox Christological views – allegedly derived from, or compatible with, Scripture – include Arius, the Nestorians (although probably not Nestorius) and, perhaps, Origen. So a high view of Scripture does not guarantee an orthodox Christology. But it does foreclose certain ways of thinking about Christology that are theologically unpalatable. For instance, someone with a high view of Scripture is probably less likely to think that Christ is merely a human being (given statements Christ makes about himself and his relationship to the Father, or statements made about him in the New Testament documents), or that his work is less than the means by which God reconciles human beings to himself (again, given what the New Testament says about Christ being the means by which salvation is brought about).

1.2 *Creeks and Confessions*

Secondly, what follows assumes that the creeds of the ecumenical councils of the church have a special place in Christian thinking. They act as a sort of hermeneutical bridge between Scripture and the church.⁴ By this I mean the creeds of the ecumenical councils help us to understand what Scripture is, or is not, saying about a particular doctrine. To change the metaphor, they offer a dogmatic framework for subsequent theological reflection on the matters they deal with. John Webster has recently written of creeds and confessional formulae as acts of confessing the gospel, whereby ‘the church binds itself to the gospel’.⁵ There is certainly something to be said for this observation, although

3. As is well known, Martin Luther adopted a similar procedure in the sixteenth century, as he compiled the translated portions of his German Bible. He placed certain canonical books in an appendix because he did not think they represented the ‘pure’ doctrine of the gospel as effectively as other books did (notoriously, he considered James to be ‘a right strawy epistle’). This does reflect a high view of Scripture, on my accounting. Nevertheless, such a procedure is no more acceptable than Marcion’s mutilated canon.

4. The role of the Church in the formation of the Creeds has historically been the subject of some dispute between different ecclesial bodies. My own view is that the Fathers of the ecumenical councils laboured under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, as they reflected on the truth of Holy Scripture, producing documents that have a special status in the life of the Church as a consequence of this.

5. John Webster, *Confessing God, Essays in Christian Dogmatics II* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2005) p. 69. Later in the same essay, Webster puts it like this: ‘a creed or confessional formula is a public and binding indication of the gospel set before us in the scriptural witness, through which the church affirms its allegiance to God, repudiates the falsehood by which the church is threatened, and assembles around the judgement and consolation of the gospel’. *Ibid.*, pp. 73–74, italics in the original.

care must be taken in using theologically loaded verbs like ‘binding’.⁶ Creeds are not merely a means to making dogmatic sense of, say, the Incarnation. They are also – just as fundamentally – a means of confessing faith in the Christ to whom the creeds bear witness, as they are attempts to make sense of the gospel accounts of who Christ is. This underlines the fact that the creeds of the Church, and the ecumenical creeds in particular, have several functions that run together: they bear witness to the gospel in Scripture, they tease out aspects of the doctrine of the gospel, and because they do this, they have served a doxological and liturgical purpose in the life of the Church, as a means by which Christians may affirm what it is that they believe, and what it is that holds the Church together.

Only the first seven councils of the Church count as truly ecumenical. For only these seven councils are held in common by eastern and western Christians, being councils that were truly representative of the whole undivided Church, prior to the great schism of AD 1054.⁷ There are communions that reject one or more of the creeds these councils authorized. One of these is the Coptic Church, which has never reconciled herself to the symbol of the Council of Chalcedon of AD 451. Many Protestant communions also reject some of the canons of the later ecumenical councils, particularly with respect to the use of icons and images in Christian worship. That said, almost all Christians whether Protestant, Roman Catholic or Eastern Orthodox, affirm the four great creedal statements of the councils of Nicea in AD 325, Constantinople in AD 381, Ephesus in AD 431 and Chalcedon as, in some important sense, theologically normative.⁸ Exactly what the nature of this authority consists in has been a matter of dispute. In the chapters that follow, we shall assume that those ecumenical councils that touch upon matters Christological are theologically binding because they are repositories of dogmatic reflection upon Scripture by the undivided Church, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.⁹

6. For instance, Roman Catholic Christians will think of the ecumenical creeds as ‘binding’ in a way that might be theologically unacceptable to some theologically conservative Protestants, for whom no dogmatic statement that is not a proposition of Scripture can be said to be theologically binding. By contrast, theologically liberal Protestants might object that no theological statement, perhaps not even a given statement in Scripture, is theologically binding because all theology is potentially revisable in light of further experience of the divine.

7. A similar privileging of the life of the Church prior to AD 1054 can be found in the work of William Abraham, who connects it with his concept of ‘Canonical Theism’, roughly, the ‘canon’ of beliefs about God ratified by the whole Church prior to the Great Schism. See his *Crossing the Threshold of Divine Revelation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006) pp. xii–xiii.

8. Compare D. H. Williams who says that the Creed of Nicea as amended by the Council of Constantinople in 381, forming the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, was the touchstone for all later symbols, particularly after Chalcedon. No creed after Chalcedon shares ‘the same foundational character as the patristic creeds of the fourth and fifth centuries’. Williams, *Evangelicals and Tradition* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic and Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2005) p. 43.

9. Dispute about how the canons of one of the ecumenical councils are theologically binding depends in large part upon one’s ecclesiology. Roman Catholics may think it inconceivable that an

We shall also assume that the symbols of the four great councils held in common by all catholic Christians have a special place of theological honour and importance, and should be taken with great seriousness in matters doctrinal. With respect to Christology in particular, it seems to me that the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed of AD 381, the Chalcedonian definition of AD 451 and the canons of the Third Council of Constantinople in AD 680–681, are rightly seen as dogmatic pronouncements that were worked out in the teeth of various attempts to revise what was believed to be the biblical view of the person and work of Christ. These particular conciliar statements are of considerable dogmatic significance for what follows. Although they are not revelation, nor the place wherein God reveals himself by his Spirit (although some might want to claim this), they bind together the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church with Christological bands that reflects the teaching of Scripture.

This does not mean that the ecumenical councils say *everything* that needs to be said about the person and work of Christ (or, about other central and defining doctrines of the faith). There is nothing about the nature of the atonement in the ecumenical creeds, which has led to considerable controversy in subsequent church history. But where the creeds do touch on matters Christological, what they say should be weighed very carefully. In fact, I would suggest that in matters concerning Christian doctrine the teaching of an ecumenical creed should only be set to one side if it teaches something contrary to Scripture, or that occludes Scriptural teaching.¹⁰

There are other confessions and creeds that are held by particular ecclesiastical bodies and denominations that are not agreed upon by the vast majority of the church, as the ecumenical creeds are. One such is the so-called Athanasian Creed, which most Christians believe to be ancient and important, but not on a

ecumenical council under the guidance of the Holy Spirit can deliver some falsehood to the Church. But some Protestants will complain that this gives too much weight to ecclesiastical authorities, which might be mistaken in their interpretation of Scripture, as some think was the case respecting the Iconoclastic Controversy. I am inclined to the former of these two views, not because I believe the Church infallible (I do not), but because it seems extremely implausible to think that God would allow the vast majority of the Christian Church to be led into error on matters central to the faith by believing the canons of an ecumenical council, such as that given in, say, the Chalcedonian ‘definition’ of the person of Christ.

10. I am not suggesting that if the Council of Chalcedon had declared that all propositions of the form ‘p and ~p’ are valid, we should believe that. It is not beyond the bounds of possibility for a Church council to be wrong about something – they are not infallible guides in the same way as Scripture is often thought to be. My point is really this: if an ecumenical council were to declare something about a particular doctrine of Christian theology that contradicts the teaching of Scripture, then the word of the council would have to be disregarded: Scripture is normative in a way that not even a church council (even an ecumenical church council) is. But as my previous comments should have made clear, I do not think that ecumenical councils have *in fact* canonized substantive errors, due to the oversight of the Holy Spirit.

par with the ecumenical creeds, because it was never ratified by an ecumenical council. A confession that belongs to a particular ecclesiastical body or polity might be the Westminster Confession, beloved of Presbyterians, although I would also include here pronouncements by councils like Trent and Vatican I or II. All such creeds, confessions and conciliar statements are of less importance than the ecumenical creeds, not least because only a proportion of the Church upholds them. But such confessions are not of negligible worth. They are important repositories of doctrinal reflection, and for my part I am persuaded that such confessions are of more significance than the teaching of any one particular theologian because they represent the ‘mind’, or collective wisdom of a conclave of theologians and church leaders seeking to make sense of the teaching of Scripture for the Christian community.

To sum up: creedal and confessional documents are *norma normata*, or standardized norms, in the life of the church. They do not have the same authority in matters touching dogma that Scripture has, as the *principium theologiae* that is, the collection of fundamental principles or sources for theology. It was as the church stood against the voices of particular theologians or groups who claimed to have uncovered the real meaning of salvation ostensibly occluded by the emerging theological consensus that the ecumenical creeds were forged. And, in a similar way, it was as particular ecclesial traditions sought to safeguard their own particular theological distinctiveness that they drew up the creedal and confessional statements that we now have. Hence, the authority invested in creeds and confessions is derivative, and dependent on the normative authority of Scripture.¹¹

1.3 Christian Theologians

This brings us to the teaching of the Doctors and theologians of the Church. Undoubtedly, there are some theologians whose teaching has an enduring significance, and who have left the Church a body of work that offers an important means by which to interrogate, correct and amend contemporary theological myopia. Theologians of the past have their own blind spots, of course. Yet we can often see the motes in their theology much more clearly than the planks in our own. For this reason, we need to listen to the thinkers of

11. Compare Article XXI of the Thirty Nine Articles of the Church of England, which states:

General Councils. . . . When they be gathered together, (forasmuch as they be an assembly of men, whereof all be not governed with the Spirit and Word of God) they may err, and sometimes have erred, even in things pertaining unto God. Wherefore things ordained by them as necessary to salvation have neither strength nor authority, unless it may be declared that they be taken out of holy Scripture. (*The Book of Common Prayer* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968 [1662]) p. 620)

the past. Theological forebears often help correct the blind spots we might not discover without them. Amongst these theologians are some who are clearly head and shoulders above the rest. I suggest that their thinking should be taken more seriously than, say, the latest theologically fashionable volume or school of thought because their teaching has been tried and tested over time, and granted a measure of authority through being used by large segments of the Church as sources of derivative theological authority in particular doctrinal disputes. In this class of theologians whose work has had a lasting impact upon subsequent theology, and whose views are worthy of serious engagement, I would include the works of theologians like St Augustine of Hippo, St John of Damascus, St Anselm of Canterbury, St Thomas Aquinas, Martin Luther, John Calvin, Luis de Molina, Jonathan Edwards and Karl Barth. (Naturally, this is an indicative, not an exhaustive list that betrays something of my own theological proclivities.)

Nevertheless, the work of individual theologians, even the great Doctors of the Church like St Augustine or St Thomas, is not as important, for the purposes of systematic theology, as confessions or ecumenical creeds.¹² Their views cannot command the same attention that, say, the Council of Chalcedon can, in part because their pronouncements do not have the same 'reach' as Chalcedon. This is not merely a matter of influence. Some theologians have been extremely influential on the shape of theology beyond their own ecclesial community. St Augustine is surely the principal example of this. The difference I have in mind depends on the theological authority invested in what a given theologian says on the one hand, and what a particular ecumenical symbol records, on the other. We might put it like this: theologians offer up their arguments for and against particular theological views. Where those views are not matters that have been defined by an ecumenical council like Chalcedon, and are not iterations on confessional statements of a particular tradition to which they belong, their statements are *theologoumena*. That is, what they are offering is an informed theological *opinion* on a particular matter of doctrine. This is not the case when it comes to an ecumenical symbol, or part thereof, such as the so-called definition of the person of Christ given by the Fathers of Chalcedon. This sort of theological pronouncement has a different order of theological weight from that of even an Augustine, which has been recognized as such by the church down through the ages. What it offers is not doctrine or teaching so much as *dogma*, that is, particular views that are understood to be *de fide*, or deliverances of the faith, upheld by all catholic Christians, codifying

12. In this respect, I part company with Roman Catholic teaching that St Thomas Aquinas is the official theologian of the Church, or Protestant theologians who, if not in theory, nevertheless in fact, act as though Luther, or Calvin or Barth, were the official theologian of the Church. This is not to deny that I have a very high regard for all these theologians. My point here is about the relative authority that should be invested in their teachings, not the individual merits of these particular theologians.

something taught in Scripture. And it should hardly need to be said that the work of any Christian theologian is entirely subordinate to Scripture.

1.4 *The Role of Tradition*

It is time to take stock. In light of the foregoing discussion, I offer the following principles concerning matters of theological authority that, taken together, form a consistent whole:

1. Scripture is the *norma normans*, the *principium theologiae*. It is the final arbiter of matters theological for Christians as the particular place in which God reveals himself to his people. This is the first-order authority in all matters of Christian doctrine.
2. Catholic creeds, as defined by an ecumenical council of the Church, constitute a first tier of *norma normata*, which have second-order authority in matters touching Christian doctrine. Such norms derive their authority from Scripture to which they bear witness.
3. Confessional and conciliar statements of particular ecclesial bodies are a second tier of *norma normata*, which have third-order authority in matters touching Christian doctrine. They also derive their authority from Scripture to the extent that they faithfully reflect the teaching of Scripture.
4. The particular doctrines espoused by theologians including those individuals accorded the title Doctor of the Church which are not reiterations of matters that are *de fide*, or entailed by something *de fide*, constitute *theologoumena*, or theological opinions, which are not binding upon the Church, but which may be offered up for legitimate discussion within the Church.

The ascending order of *norma normata*, including *theologoumena* at the very bottom of this hierarchy of doctrine, are all norms that are subordinate to the authority of Scripture. And, on my way of thinking, the descending order of subordinate norms has a doctrinal value and status equivalent to the place each possesses in that descending order. So the material content of each standard of authority determines the order of dependence envisaged, yielding a distinctively, and richly Christian theological pattern or order of norms. For this reason catholic creeds are of more value than confessional statements, and *theologoumena* are of less value than either confessional statements or catholic creeds, although they are not without value.

It seems to me that this way of thinking about the relationship between the *norma normata* and the *norma normans* holds no terror for the theologian committed to Reformation principles like the perspicacity and final authority of Scripture in all matters of Christian doctrine. And this, I suggest, is one way of making sense of the Reformation principle *sola scriptura*. Scripture alone is the final arbiter in matters of doctrine, but (somewhat paradoxically) Scripture is never alone. It is always read within the context of a given ecclesial community, which is, as it were, surrounded by a great cloud of theological witnesses

and informed by the Christian tradition.¹³ This tradition includes the subordinate norms belonging to the whole Church that have been believed *ubique, semper, et ab omnibus*¹⁴ (everywhere, always and by all), as well as the norms which express the particular beliefs of a given ecclesial body, or denomination, to which a given ecclesial community belongs. At the very least, any credible *theologoumenon* must take seriously the tradition, including the *norma normans*. Failure to do so is not only theologically naïve, but potentially destructive of the life of the Church. For in a similar way many heretics of the past have begun their own journey away from orthodox Christian belief.¹⁵

So those who claim their own views comport with Scripture but not these *norma normata* should be treated with a healthy dose of scepticism by the theological community.¹⁶ For the Church catholic, dogmatic authority is a top-down affair, generated by Scripture as *norma normans*, and in a subordinate sense guarded or preserved by the *norma normata*. It is not something generated from the bottom-up, that is, from the opinions of private individuals or

13. For a recent statement of this sort of view, see John Webster *Holy Scripture, A Dogmatic Sketch* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

14. Vincent of Lérins, *Commonitorium* I. 2. 6., The wider context in which Vincent's famous dictum is situated is worth citing: 'in the Catholic Church itself, all possible care must be taken, that we hold that faith that has been believed everywhere, always, by all [*ubique, semper, ab omnibus*].' He goes on, '[t]his rule we shall observe if we follow universality, antiquity, consent.' (Cited from *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, Second Series, Vol. XI Sulpitius Severus, Vincent of Lerins, John Cassian*, trans. C. A. Heurtley, eds Philip Schaff and Henry Wace [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1982 [1886-1889]] p. 132.) All Christians, Protestants, Roman Catholic and Orthodox, have a stake in the catholicity of the church. Useful discussion of the orthodox consensus, and Vincent, can be found in Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition, 1: The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100-600)* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1971) ch. 7.

15. There are also important ways in which doctrine has developed in the history of the Church. The most important dogmatic developments of this kind are, of course, the formal definitions of the doctrines of the Trinity and the theanthropic person of Christ, to be found in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan and Chalcedonian Creeds, respectively. It seems to me that these doctrinal developments of what was eventually understood to be *de fide* (of the faith) were only developments in the Church's understanding of what God had given, either explicitly or implicitly, in Scripture. They are not developments beyond the teaching of Scripture, but more like extrapolations from what Scripture teaches, making plain what, in previous times, was sometimes only partially understood. In this respect, the development of catholic theology is rather like the way in which one comes to see things in a particular work of art after some contemplation that were not immediately apparent at first glance. A classic example of this is the Mona Lisa, a painting full of secrets that are only gradually disclosed through careful study.

16. Of course this does mean that if my own position does not comport with all the norms listed here, it should be treated with scepticism. However, this objection is not fatal to my position because (a) it is not obvious that my view does fail in this respect, and (b) by my own lights any view I express here is only a *theologoumenon*, or theological opinion. With this in mind I am quite happy to concede that my account of how theological authorities should be weighted may need correction in ways I am currently unable to see.

groups, although private individuals or groups may contribute to the doctrinal life of the church in a modest fashion.

To underline this point, it is worth saying that it is perfectly feasible for someone to hold views that are consistent with the letter of Scripture, but which are false. Indeed, it is perfectly feasible for a particular ecclesial community to hold views consistent with the *letter* of Scripture, which are false. Anyone who doubts this should simply cast his or her mind back to the debacle attending Galileo's publication of a Copernican account of cosmology in 1616. The Roman Catholic theologians who debated whether the heliocentric view of the solar system was correct concluded that it was 'foolish and absurd philosophically, and formally heretical, inasmuch as it expressly contradicts the doctrine of the Holy Scripture in many passages, both in their literal meaning and in the general interpretation of the Fathers and Doctors'.¹⁷ But, as history records, this was a grave mistake. For our purposes the lesson to be learnt here is that particular philosophical views that seem to be plausible, comport with contemporary 'science', and seem consistent with Scripture, may yet turn out to be false in the long run. We might put it like this: the metaphysical truth of the matter is 'out there', so to speak, but our grasp of it is not always as secure as we think it is.

But where creeds or confessions have sought to safeguard a particular dogmatic issue against those who would attack it and who often claim the support of Scripture in so doing, we need to be much more circumspect. After all, it is the canons of the ecumenical councils culminating in Chalcedon in AD 451 and then the Third Council of Constantinople in AD 681 that we have to thank for clarifying what it means to say, with the Apostle, that 'God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself' (2 Cor. 5.19). To repeat, I am not denying that it is possible for *norma normata* to be wrong on a particular dogmatic question. My point here is that we (individual theologians) need a very considerable theological reason for rejecting a subordinate theological norm that is adhered to by all catholic Christians, such as the so-called Chalcedonian 'definition' of the person of Christ. My own private views about the metaphysics of human persons are not of greater dogmatic authority than the canons of Chalcedon, even if my views are consistent with Scripture. For private arguments, even if logically impeccable, are not the be-all-and-end-all when it comes to central and defining matters of Christian doctrine, and may well turn out to be false. For one can have a logically valid but unsound argument. And one can have a private opinion, which, though internally consistent and beyond logical reproach, is inconsistent with other things, such as the teaching of an

17. Cited in Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Reason within the Bounds of Religion, Second Edition* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1984 [1976]) p. 15. This volume is a classic *exposé* of the intellectual hubris of classical foundationalism, in the course of which the author demonstrates the perils of trying to fit one's theological commitments to a procrustean bed of ideas.

ecumenical council like Chalcedon, or – more importantly – the doctrine of Scripture.

1.5 Reason and Experience

Some theologians, particularly those in the Wesleyan tradition, speak of the fourfold authority of Scripture, tradition, reason and experience. This is certainly a helpful way of thinking about the nature of theological authority, provided certain caveats are borne in mind about the supremacy of Scripture and the derivative and hermeneutical role of tradition.¹⁸ But reason also plays a role in theology, even in the thought of those theologians who, like Luther, professed to have a very low view of the place of reason (Luther supposedly dubbed reason, ‘the Devil’s whore’). Even Luther expressed his theology in the form of propositions and arguments that he laid out in a logical fashion, attempting to avoid fallacies and other missteps in his reasoning as he did so. It seems to me that this is how philosophy can play a useful role in theology. Philosophy is sometimes thought of as a rival discipline to theology.¹⁹ And as practiced by contemporary philosophers that is, at times, true. However, to suggest that philosophy as a discipline is opposed to theology is rather like saying the findings of the natural sciences offer a rival account of the world to that found in Christian theology. There are scientists who are vehemently anti-Christian, but this does not mean that the natural sciences are anti-Christian. In fact, it makes no sense to say the natural sciences are anti-Christian. The body of knowledge the natural sciences have generated is not asking theological questions at all. It is simply a category mistake to think it is.

Similarly, philosophy, at least as it is found amongst most contemporary Anglo-American practitioners, offers a set of tools by which to make sense of particular arguments, as well as commitment to certain objectives in intellectual discourse, including the intellectual virtues of clarity, simplicity and brevity of expression, and a penchant for the construction of metaphysical world-views. It is foolish to blame these philosophical tools and notions when they are used for non-theological purposes, just as it is foolish to blame the screwdriver that punctures a tyre in the hands of a malicious or inept mechanic. In this volume, and in keeping with the vast majority of the Christian tradition, we shall deploy the tools of philosophy where appropriate, to lay bare the form

18. For our purposes, tradition corresponds to what has been believed everywhere, by all Christians, since ancient times, corresponding to Vincent of Lérins’ dictum. This includes, but is not exhausted by, the symbols of the four great creeds, the deliverances of councils, confessional documents and the teaching of doctors and theologians of the church.

19. See, for example, Robert Jenson’s claim that western philosophy is a secularized theology, which is a rival discipline to theology and should be resisted. He makes this case in his *Systematic Theology, Vol. 1, The Triune God* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997) ch. 1. This is touched upon in ch. 3 of this volume.

of theological arguments. Only once this is done can we see where the argument in question goes awry.

However, nothing in what follows should be taken as implying that reason, or philosophy for that matter, is the ultimate arbiter of what is theologically acceptable or unacceptable. A tool cannot perform a task without direction or programming, and a particular tool does not dictate the parameters of a task for which it is deployed. True, the wrong tool can be used for a particular job: A hammer will not help examine microscopic organisms in a Petri dish culture. But nothing in what follows assumes that philosophical tools govern what is theologically acceptable. Nor, I hope, do the philosophical tools used skew the sort of theological question being asked. Clear reasoning should be a theological virtue just as it is a virtue in any other academic discipline. It is God who reveals the data of revealed theology and Christology belongs to this branch of theological science. Some of this data can be made sense of (we can understand what God is saying to us). But there is a very real sense in which the central doctrines of Christian theology are deeply mysterious and will forever remain so. Sanctified reason, in the Anselmian and Augustinian tradition of *fides quarens intellectum* (faith seeking understanding) should be used to try to make sense of what can be understood of these divine mysteries, the Incarnation included. But this must be done with an intellectual humility. We cannot pretend to be able to fathom the depths of the Holy Trinity or the Incarnation. This is not a way of avoiding hard questions or covering over weak arguments; it is recognition of the limitations of human ratiocination. Human reason alone cannot make sense of the Trinity or the Incarnation. God has to reveal these things to us. But reason has a function in trying to tease out the logical interrelationships between doctrines that have been revealed, and the inner coherence of each of the doctrines themselves. It is in this Anselmian spirit, that reason is deployed here.

There is also a place for experience in theology. This has always been the case, although it has not always been acknowledged to be the case. The Montanist movement in the early Church, medieval mystical writers like St John of the Cross or Dame Julian of Norwich, theologians of the eighteenth-century Great Awakening, like John Wesley or Jonathan Edwards and charismatic renewal in the twentieth, are perhaps some of the better known examples of experiential (or, as it used to be called, 'experimental') Christian theology. But it would be wrong to think that theologians and churchmen not included in such movements were without such an experiential dimension to their Christian lives or theology. To give just two examples, Augustine famously heard children singing 'tolle, lege' (take, read) and picked up a copy of the Pauline epistles, read, and was converted. And Thomas, at the close of his life, experienced a profound meeting with God that left him thinking his (unfinished) monumental theological achievements were 'so much straw'. Such stories could be multiplied. What they show is that there is an important experiential dimension to theology. Or, to put it another way, theology is a dead letter without the

pneumatic life of religious experience. We might even observe that there is no great theologian in the Christian tradition of whom it can be said that theology was not the product of such experience. In this volume little is said about the experiential side of theology. But it informs much of what is discussed. I assume that religious experience can throw new light on old problems and even, at times, force us to re-think what we thought we knew about the Christian life. But all religious experience should be subordinate to the teaching of Scripture and tradition. Such experience is not normative, as Scripture is. And it is not embedded in Christian thinking like the tradition. Still, it offers valuable insights into the religious life that can be startling and deeply moving.

I say this in order to indicate the positive role experience may play in the formation of the theologian and even themes in the theology that he or she formulates. But in my view it would be a mistake to think that doctrine is merely the codification of religious experience. This view, often associated with Schleiermacher and the nineteenth century liberal theologians who found his thinking persuasive, offers an important insight into the relationship between experience and the formation of doctrine. That much is, I think, indisputable. But this is not equivalent to saying doctrine is derived solely through religious experience, nor that such religious experience may offer reason to revise the doctrine we hold. The Schleiermacherian might claim that doctrine is a means of codifying a religious experience of God for the benefit of the Christian community. And this might be consistent with a critically realist account of theology, where the object of theology (God) brings about such religious experiences which, when codified, approximate to a greater or lesser degree to the object of theology. Then, doctrine is revisable to the extent that it may be replaced with a better approximation to the truth of the matter, and new religious experiences of the right sort may bring about such doctrinal revision. There is much that is attractive about such a proposal. But such attraction is beguiling. Although all doctrine does rest upon religious experience in the final analysis (God *reveals* himself to some individual) this does not necessarily imply that present religious experience may overturn previous experience. For the experience of God codified in Scripture is normative in the way that my experience of God is not, because my experience is not divine revelation in the sense that Scripture is, or becomes, through the work of the Holy Spirit.

2. *Method in Christology*

Having sketched out some parameters for weighting authority in matters theological, we turn to some specific methodological issues for Christology.

2.1 *On Christology from 'Above' and 'Below' and on 'High' and 'Low' Christology*

There has been a lot of discussion in modern theology about how one should go about making Christological statements, and particularly, whether one or

other method of doing so is to be preferred to another. In this literature, approaches to Christology are often carved up into ‘high’ and ‘low’, as well as speaking of ‘Christology from above’ and ‘Christology from below’. Since it is important to be clear just what these words mean, we shall begin with some words of terminological clarification.²⁰

I. HIGH CHRISTOLOGY

I take it that a ‘high’ Christology is a Christology according to which Christ is, minimally, *more than human*. More formally,

High Christology = df. A Christology according to which Christ is (minimally) more than human.²¹

Normally, and in light of Chalcedonian Christology, this is taken to mean Christ is fully but not merely, man – he is also fully divine.²² This is ‘high’ in the relevant sense since it means that Christ is *more than* human, although he is also fully human.²³ But some ‘high’ Christologies might take the claim that Christ is more than human in a rather different direction, meaning by it that Christ is not human at all. His ‘human nature’ is a sort of facsimile, or similitude of real human nature that he ‘wears’ as a divine entity. Docetists are the paradigmatic example of this sort of Christology. The docetic Christology claims that Christ appears to be human, though he cannot be human, strictly speaking, because a divine being cannot have anything to do with matter, which would defile it. Assuming possession of a human nature normally includes

20. Interested readers should consult Wolfhart Pannenberg *Jesus – God and Man* trans. Lewis L. Wilkins and Duane E. Priebe (London: SCM Press, 1968), particularly ch. 1. II, 33–37. According to Stanley Grenz, Pannenberg’s later statement in *Systematic Theology Vol. II*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), ch. 9 §1 ends up abandoning the distinction between Christology ‘from above’ and ‘from below’ as unhelpful. (See Stanley J. Grenz *Reason for Hope, The Systematic Theology of Wolfhart Pannenberg, Second Edition* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005) p. 182.) Useful discussion is also to be found in Otto Weber *Foundations of Dogmatics, Vol. II*, trans. Darrell L. Guder (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1983), in which he attempts to get beyond the language of ‘above’ and ‘below’ in Christology. See especially, ch. 1, pp. 13–26.

21. The notation ‘= df.’, culled from contemporary analytical philosophy (and in particular, the work of Roderick Chisholm) means ‘is equivalent to the following definition’. I shall use this several times in what follows.

22. Here I borrow the terms ‘fully’ and ‘merely’ human as they occur in Thomas Morris’ account of the Incarnation. See *The Logic of God Incarnate* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986). Although these ideas can be found in catholic Christology, Morris’s discussion offers a particularly clear way of making sense of this distinction between being ‘merely’ and ‘fully’ human.

23. A modern theological statement of this view can be found in Adams, *Christ and Horrors*, p. 27. Compare Pannenberg, *Jesus – God and Man*, p. 34; Weber, *Foundation of Dogmatics, Vol. II*, pp. 13–14.

possession of a material human body,²⁴ Christ's 'body' cannot have been really corporeal, on pain of his being something less than divine. So, Christ's humanity is merely a simulacrum of true humanity. He appears to be human as the angels that met Abraham at Mamre in Gen. 18 appeared to be human, though they were not.²⁵

Docetic Christology counts as a high Christology because it is one way of blocking a certain sort of theological reductionism of the person of Christ, where Christ was seen as *merely* human. Arianism might be thought to represent a different unorthodox high Christological trajectory, where Christ is something like a super-angelic being, the first creation of God. I suggest that the convention of regarding the phrase 'high Christology' as semantically equivalent to 'creedally orthodox Christology' is an unfortunate one, because it makes it difficult to place unorthodox Christologies like those offered by docetics and Arians. These are surely 'high' in the sense that they regard Christ as being more than human. (In the case of docetism he is only apparently human, of course.) And we could think of other Christologies that would fit with the definition offered here but which would not be orthodox, for example, that Christ is an incarnate angel, or that Christ is a kind of demi-god, or some other superhuman entity. These Christologies may not be 'high' in the sense of being creedally orthodox. But they are surely 'high' in the sense of regarding Christ as something more than a mere mortal. We might revise our theological vocabulary in light of this. Then 'high Christologies' might, like the definition offered above, include these unorthodox accounts of the person of Christ, with an additional category – 'highest Christology', perhaps – reserved for creedally orthodox Christology. But this is also tendentious, since I suppose those who are docetics might claim that, in one respect, orthodox Christology is not 'high' enough, because it allows that Christ is truly, though not merely, human. The docetic understanding of Christ is 'higher' than this because it denies that the divine can have anything to do with the material world, so Christ being truly divine can only be apparently corporeal. So it looks like in one important respect, orthodox Christology is not the 'highest' Christology one can conceive of. Nor, given the claims of docetic Christology, is it the 'highest' that has been conceived of in the history of Christian thought.

Of course the theologian is perfectly within her rights to respond by saying 'well, this is how *I* define "high Christology"' and proceed to the standard identification of high Christology with creedally orthodox Christology. But that does nothing to alleviate the fact that this is a merely a theological convention,

24. *Pace* idealists like Bishop Berkeley and his modern day epigone, who deny that there is any such thing as a material object.

25. At one stage (and in my view mistakenly), Jürgen Moltmann even goes as far as saying that as a consequence of adherence to an impassible God 'a mild docetism runs throughout the Christology of the ancient church!' *The Crucified God*, trans. R. A. Wilson and John Bowden (London: SCM Press, 1974), p. 89.

and a rather sloppy one at that. 'High Christology' does not have the semantic *denotation* 'creedally orthodox Christology' as should be obvious given the foregoing. All of which leads me to the conclusion that 'high Christology' is a rather unhelpful term. Though it has a wide currency, it is not semantically or materially equivalent to 'creedally orthodox Christology'. That said, the phrase 'high Christology', as I have defined it, is *consistent* with orthodoxy. The problem is, it is also semantically and (more importantly, perhaps) theologically porous enough to be used to refer to very different views, including docetism and Arianism. Accordingly, we might say that an orthodox Christology includes, but is conceptually richer than, a high Christology. And this does rather diminish the utility of the term for contemporary theology.

II. LOW CHRISTOLOGY

I take it that a 'low' Christology is, minimally, a Christology according to which Christ is thought to be only a man. He is not in any way superhuman, semi-divine or divine. Put more formally,

Low Christology = df. A Christology according to which Christ is (minimally) fully and merely human.

Unlike the discussion of high Christology, the conventional way in which 'low Christology' is identified with the idea that Christ is fully human is, it seems to me, substantially correct. The Christ of the gospels is clearly a human being – on this all parties to the debate can agree.²⁶ The theologically controversial issue is whether he is *merely* human. In this regard, our basic definition would need to be augmented in order to deliver a Christology of any theological substance. Interestingly, the rationale for a docetic Christology might also provide the means by which to motivate a low Christology: Christ cannot be divine because he was truly human and God cannot have anything to do with matter, which is inherently evil or otherwise such that God cannot be associated with it. Christ may be an extraordinary human being, but he is fully and merely human.

Similarly, one might accept a low Christology because one is convinced that if there is a God he cannot interfere with a created world that is a closed causal system, such as the one many physicists suppose we inhabit. Thus one might adopt a low Christology motivated by a latter-day version of the sort of concerns that drove eighteenth century deists to adopt the position they did. But in the contemporary academy there will also be those who think a low Christology is the right way to begin thinking about the person of Christ

26. Discounting those fanciful suggestions that Christ is an extra-terrestrial life form of some kind. For a literary example of this, see Patrick Tilley's quasi-science fiction novel, *Mission* (New York: Time Warner books 1998 [1981]).

because metaphysical naturalism is true: the only things that exist are material objects. There is, perhaps there can be, no immaterial entity like God. So we must begin our theologizing about Christ with the notion, consistent with this metaphysically naturalist background assumption, that Christ is merely human. As with our brief account of high Christology, I am only concerned here to offer some indications of how one might enrich a commitment to a low Christology (as defined above) so as to deliver the basis of a substantive Christological method. And as before, the sort of assumptions one brings to the theological table will be important in shaping the sort of Christological method one finds most amenable.

III. CHRISTOLOGY FROM ABOVE

Christology from above has an ancient and venerable theological pedigree, being a method that begins with the data of divine revelation, and/or of creedal and confessional symbols and works from that basis to particular dogmatic statements about the person of Christ. In this way, we might frame a definition of Christology from above thus,

Christology from Above = df. any method in Christology that begins with the data of divine revelation contained in, or generated by Scripture and/or the propositions of the catholic creeds and confessional statements and uses these data to formulate Christological statements.

Such a method presumes what I have been calling a high view of Scripture.²⁷ It may also include the idea that the catholic creeds offer a norm by which doctrine should be judged. This is not the same as saying that Christology from above assumes *a priori* that Christ is the God-Man. Such an assumption would yield a more robust 'Christology from above' than that just outlined. But, on my way of thinking, the Christologist who adopts the method 'from above' need not be committed at the outset to the notion that Christ is the God-Man.²⁸ One need only be committed to the weaker claims concerning the high view of Scripture and/or the creeds, both of which as I have already indicated, I take to

27. See the comments made in the previous section of this chapter about what I presume a high view of Scripture to include. I take it that any theologian who thinks Scripture is or contains, or perhaps is witness to and through the action of the Holy Spirit becomes divine revelation, will be able to affirm a Christology from above in the sense I mean here.

28. If one is committed to the idea that Christ is God Incarnate at the outset, then one will begin theological reflection on the person of Christ with a correspondingly robust version of Christology from above. But if one is committed to the weaker claim that Christology from above begins with the data of revelation and the catholic creeds, then one might also have a Christology from above in the sense that one's Christology is formed by the data of divine revelation – it is, quite literally, formed on the basis of what is given 'from above'. But this need not include the additional claim about Christ being God Incarnate. That is the point I am striving to make clear here, and which is overlooked in much of the literature on this matter.

be norms by which we judge matters theological. On this way of thinking Scripture is a kind of norming norm under which stands all other theological authority in matters touching the formation of Christian doctrine. Although, as a matter of fact, by the time many Christologists come to consider the person of Christ they have already acquired the *a priori* assumption that Christ is the God-Man, it is not implausible to think that from consideration of Scripture and/or the creeds one might form the view that Christ is the God-Man, and proceed on that basis to formulate Christian doctrine. And I suppose this is just what many Christians have done, unless one is to believe that all Christians when confronted with Scripture or, say, the canons of the Council of Chalcedon, are already in possession of a clear, well-developed understanding of who Christ is, and all understand what it means to say that Christ is the God-Man, or the Second Person of the Trinity Incarnate, and so forth. But this seems monumentally implausible.²⁹

IV. CHRISTOLOGY FROM BELOW

Conversely, 'Christology from below' begins with the data of history and what we can know of the person of Christ from the historical record alone. Such a method is a relative newcomer to the theological scene, having developed in large measure as a consequence of the rise of historical biblical criticism in the early Enlightenment.³⁰ Normally, this way of thinking presumes a certain methodological naturalism when it comes to historiography, in keeping with current canons by which much of history as an academic discipline is pursued. On this historical basis, dogmatic statements can be made. We might express this method as follows:

Christology from Below = df. any method in Christology that begins with the data of historical documents that refer to Christ including the New Testament and other extra-biblical materials, and uses these data to formulate Christological statements.

Marilyn Adams thinks that Christology from below 'holds itself responsible to begin with history, or at any rate the New Testament record'.³¹ But this

29. For this reason, it seems to me that Pannenberg's report that 'It is characteristic of all these attempts to build a "Christology from above" that the doctrine of the Trinity is presupposed and the question posed is: How has the Second Person of the Trinity (the Logos) assumed a human nature?' is simply overdone. For this is not characteristic of *all* Christians who would hold to a 'from above' method in Christology, even if it is characteristic of many theologians by the time they come to the task of serious reflection upon the person of Christ – which is usually after a prolonged period of study and thought. See Pannenberg, *Jesus – God and Man*, p. 34.

30. Useful discussion of the rise of historical biblical criticism can be found in Roy A. Harrisville and Walter Sundberg, *The Bible in Modern Culture: Baruch Spinoza to Brevard Childs*, Second Edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002).

31. Adams, *Christ and Horrors*, p. 27.

seems a little too stringent. The theologian beginning ‘from below’ need not restrict herself to consideration of the New Testament record alone, though undeniably it is there that the vast majority of historical information about Christ must be gleaned. ‘From below’ theologians might think that any historical information about Christ is relevant to the task of determining who Christ is, to the extent that any historian can determine such things. It would be a poor historian that excludes certain sorts of data for ideological reasons at the outset of a particular historical inquiry. And the theologian beginning ‘from below’ might well think that it would be inappropriate to ignore evidence from extra-biblical sources in framing her picture of the historical Jesus. Indeed, the theologian working in this ‘Christology from below’ tradition might well think there are very good reasons to be suspicious of a picture of Christ formed entirely on the basis of the New Testament documents, since these documents all betray a particular theological assumption about the religious importance of the person and work of Christ that may affect the conclusion they reach about who Christ is. All the more reason to scour classical sources for extra-biblical references to Christ that might balance, or confirm, what is found in the New Testament.

So the ‘from below’ theologian might adopt Adams’ stricture (if indeed Adams meant it as a stricture). This would still count as a ‘from below’ Christology. Such a theologian would work from what can be gleaned of the historical Jesus from the biblical material, to frame dogmatic statements about Christ. She or he may even assume that the biblical material has a particular claim upon Christian theologians because it has a particular normative status for Christian thought, even if she or he does not subscribe to a high view of Scripture. And, to parse matters more finely still, it is not inconceivable that some ‘from below’ Christologists do hold a high view of Scripture but think that we must begin with an inductive, historical method by which we may arrive at substantive theological conclusions about the person of Christ. What I am trying to show is that there are various shades of Christology ‘from above’ and ‘from below’, depending on the differing theological assumptions one brings along with the methodology one adopts.

That such differences exist under the terms ‘Christology from above’ and ‘Christology from below’ has led some theologians to the conclusion that these terms are deeply problematic. To take one well-known example, Nicholas Lash has this to say about the ‘from below’ method:

[Christology from] ‘below’ refers, in different hands (and sometimes even in the same hands) to an exuberant profusion of different ‘places’. Sometimes, ‘below’ seems to refer in very general terms to ‘this world’ (as distinct from God); sometimes to characteristically twentieth-century patterns of experience (‘where we are’); sometimes to supposedly ‘primitive’, as distinct from more fully articulated Christological statements; sometimes to the man Jesus and his human experience; sometimes to history, as distinct from dogma. The point I want to make is simply that these are

different recommendations. To lump them all together, under the general rubric 'begin from below', is an excellent recipe for confusion.³²

Quite so. It might be thought that my attempt to give some definite scope to these terms offers merely a set of formal distinctions that do not bear much similarity to the sort of conceptual messiness that Lash's paper manages to capture so well. But it is my contention that the sort of confusion Lash thinks is perpetrated by those using these Christological terms in such different ways is at least in part due to the fact that there has not been sufficient attention paid to what is meant by a Christology that is 'high', 'low', 'from above' or 'from below.' When we attempt to pin down what these terms do mean it seems to me that they are much less substantive than has sometimes been thought. Or, perhaps it is that in order to capture as much of the contemporary usage of these terms as possible, one is left with a set of terms that are much less useful than is commonly thought.³³ But it is only when one begins to analyse these things that this becomes apparent.

To these formulations of the two methods in Christology, I would add two further caveats. First, note that these two broad Christological methods could easily be adapted to any particular theological topic. Those who adopt a Christology from above are usually also those who adopt a 'from above' method to doctrine generally, although this is not necessarily the case. And, as Marilyn Adams has recently shown, one can have a rather eclectic approach to matters Christological that does not easily fit with the standard means of differentiating methods in theology.³⁴ Second, and in amplification of the previous note on Lash's comments about Christology 'from below', note that the way I have framed these two methods in Christology is open-textured enough that one theologian could adopt elements of both in her approach to Christology. This is surely a strength rather than a weakness. As Lash, Adams and a number of other theologians have noted, it is folly to think one can have a method in modern theology that pays no attention to one or other of these two ways of approaching Christology.³⁵

32. Nicholas Lash 'Up and Down in Christology' in Stephen Sykes and Derek Holmes eds *New Studies in Theology 1* (London: Duckworth, 1980) p. 33.

33. Compare Brian Hebblethwaite who writes that the distinction between Christology 'from above' and 'from below' is 'very confusing' and that the distinction between them is not 'clear cut' and has generated a number of problems for Christology. See his 'The Church and Christology' in *The Incarnation, Collected Essays in Christology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987) p. 80.

34. See Adams, *Christ and Horrors*, particularly chs 1, 3 and 6.

35. Thus Karl Barth, 'the New Testament obviously speaks of Jesus Christ in both these ways: the one looking and moving, as it were, from above downwards, the other from below upwards. . . . Both are necessary. Neither can stand or be understood without the other.' In Geoffrey W. Bromiley and Thomas F. Torrance eds *Church Dogmatics IV/1* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956) p. 135.

2.2 Discussion of Methodological Terminology

The terms just discussed are still in common usage, despite the fact that they have been subject to the verbal stripes of theologians like Lash.³⁶ The problem with such language, as Lash points out, is that it is simply not specific enough, and can be used on different occasions to refer to different things, or different aspects of Christology.³⁷ What is more, it is not clear that ‘high’ Christology is synonymous with ‘Christology from above’, nor ‘low’ Christology with ‘Christology from below.’

For instance, if a Christology from above is roughly a method that begins with the data of revelation and the catholic creeds and moves from these ‘givens’ to postulating various things about the person and work of Christ, then the earliest Christians did not have a Christology ‘from above’ in this sense. They had the testimony of those who had been with Christ, and collections of sayings and stories in circulation, whether orally or in some written form. In other words, they had testimony of some kind, upon which they based their faith in Christ. And it would appear that this testimony included *bona fide* metaphysical claims about who Christ was (rather than being merely the record of some religious experience that might be overturned by further theological reflection). But the testimony was not, at that stage, ecclesiastical dogma nor was it recognized by all to be what theologians today would call ‘divine revelation’. Plainly, the earliest Christians simply did not have the conceptual apparatus necessary to make such distinctions because it had yet to be developed in the fires of Christological controversy. Such complex dogmatic equipment is the product of centuries of reflection on the *kerygma* of the Gospel. But there might still be good reason for thinking that many, if not all, the earliest Christians held to a very high Christology – even, perhaps, a Christology according to which Christ was included in the identity of God himself, as has been claimed in recent times by Richard Bauckham and Larry Hurtado, amongst others.³⁸ But even if we are not favourably disposed to this sort of Early High Christology, it seems plausible to think that from fairly early on in the life of the Church there were Christians moving towards what we would now call a ‘high’ Christology, even if that Christology was not as dogmatically sophisticated as the main tenets of later orthodox high Christology.

36. To give just two recent examples, see Geoffrey Grogan’s essay ‘Christology from Below and from Above’ in Mark Elliott and John L. McPake eds *Jesus, The Only Hope: Jesus, Yesterday, Today, Forever*. (Fearn: Christian Focus and Edinburgh: Rutherford House, 2001) pp. 59–76 and Colin Gunton, *Yesterday and Today, A Study of Continuities in Christology* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1983), *passim*.

37. Lash, ‘Up and Down in Christology’, pp. 43–44.

38. See, for example, Richard Bauckham, *God Crucified, Monotheism and Christology in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), and Larry Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ, Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003). I have discussed the contribution of these so-called Early High Christologists in *Divinity and Humanity*, ch. 6.

That is, early Christians might have had a high view of the person of Christ from the earliest times, although they did not have a 'high Christology' in the technical sense of that phrase.

But saying this makes clear that there is a problem with the term 'high' Christology, just as there is a problem with the corresponding term 'low' Christology. Some Christologists will think that it was precisely a high Christology that led a theologian like Apollinaris to think that the Word of God must assume a human body, taking the place of a human soul. Yet such 'high' Christology is hardly orthodox. Similarly, as we have already had cause to note, it seems reasonable to think that Arius had a high Christology in the sense that he thought Christ could not have been a mere man: something about Jesus of Nazareth meant he must be more than merely human, even if that 'something' did not mean (*could* not mean) Christ was God. Yet the Church anathematized Arius' Christology. Anyone who doubts that Arius had a *high* Christology should read the comments of some contemporary historical biblical critics, like John Dominic Crossan.³⁹ They will soon find that Arius had a much 'higher' regard for the person of Christ (doctrinally speaking) than someone like Crossan does, even if it was not, at the end of the day, an entirely orthodox high Christology.

So it seems that a high Christology can mean different things. Or at least, the sort of theological sensibility that means a particular theologian begins with the idea that Christ is not a mere man, but is something more – something 'divine' (taken in its broadest sense) – will mean that such a theologian will end up making claims about the person of Christ that are 'high' in the relevant sense. But not all such 'high' Christologies are theologically orthodox.

It is difficult to see how a Christology from above could yield something less than a high Christology (in the sense I am using the term). Could one begin with the data of Scripture and the catholic symbols and end up with a low Christology? I am unclear how this might work in practical terms without some obviously perverse theological gerrymandering, though the 'creativity' of theologians when it comes to such matters should not be underestimated. Still, even if the Christologist who has adopted a Christology from above normally ends up with a high Christology, what I have said indicates that the upshot of such theological reasoning need not be dogmatically acceptable, or orthodox, as the examples of Apollinaris or Arius demonstrate.

And just as earlier in this chapter I intimated that one could have a high view of Scripture and yet end up with a distorted picture of Christ (or other central dogmas of the faith) so one could begin with a Christology from below and yet end up with a surprisingly 'high' Christology – as the Apostles undoubtedly did. They encountered the peasant prophet Jesus of Nazareth, were drawn to

39. See, for example, John Dominic Crossan's distillation of much of his earlier scholarship in *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography* (New York: Harper One, 1995).

him, associated with him, followed him, and eventually, through a series of dramatic and sometimes difficult experiences (including, one presumes, being the recipients of divine revelation) came to view him as much more than another human being. So the distinction between high and low Christology on the one hand, and Christology from above and below on the other are not such that Christology from above entails a high Christology (at least, not a high Christology that is also orthodox), nor that a Christology from below entails a low Christology.

3. *Concluding Thoughts*

But, after all that, which method should the Christologist adopt? Here I am in agreement with Marilyn Adams' general proposal (though not everything about the position she ends up with), that

any reader of the Bible makes tacit philosophical assumptions, insofar as hermeneutics belongs to the subject matter of philosophy. The implicit philosophical commitments of most theologians go much further. My own contention is that the intellectual quality of theology would improve if theologians made these philosophical assumptions explicit, the better to expose them to discussion and critique . . . [once again taking] responsibility for the philosophical adequacy of their proposals.⁴⁰

The theologian must take seriously the voice of Scripture. She should also take seriously the voice of the tradition, and other theological resources such as those outlined in the first section of this chapter. But theology must also be conscious of the philosophical permutations of a given theological position and make these plain. My own predilection is for a Christology 'from above' that is 'high' in the sense of presuming that Christ is the God-Man (i.e., the conventional sense of this term), whilst taking seriously the results of historical biblical criticism. But to my mind theological tradition must be used to 'control' the theological claims often made on the basis of such historical criticism. Christology that is merely 'from below', which takes the evidence at face value and goes where it leads is as practically impossible for the theologian as it is for the skilled biblical critic.⁴¹ To claim that this is the place from which the 'from below' Christologist begins is nothing short of being intellectually fraudulent. Moreover, and taking my cue from Adams, I think that theology that makes clear the philosophical assumptions with which it is working is better for that. In my view Christology should begin with divine revelation and the catholic creeds. This should yield a 'high' Christology. It should also yield an orthodox Christology – attention to the tradition will

40. Adams, *Christ and Horrors*, p. 25. In this connection, she also advises that 'The attempt to "seal off" theological discourse from the influence of other disciplines flirts with anti-realism.'

41. As I have tried to intimate elsewhere. See *Divinity and Humanity*, ch. 6.

certainly help in this regard. An *analytic* Christology may take this direction, using the tools of analytical philosophy to make sense of doctrinal claims about Christ in the light of Scripture and the tradition. It is just such an analytical Christology that I will seek to develop in the following chapters. Though the emphasis will be on dogmatic questions and their systematic development, this should not be taken to mean that doctrinal theology takes precedence over biblical theology. The one ought to be informed by the other, in the 'hermeneutical circle'. Systematic theology without biblical theology is surely short-sighted, if not blind. But biblical theology without systematic theology is deaf to the pressing need to give a coherent sense of the whole gospel, once delivered to the saints. Only a theology that engages Scripture and the tradition can see and hear in order to *proclaim* the truth about Christ. For if Christology is not at root about the *euangelion*, if it does not attend to the voice of Scripture and the tradition, then in the spirit of David Hume we should commit it to the flames – for it can contain nothing but sophistry and illusion.