"Who is Jesus Christ For Us Today?"

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*On 31 October 2001, Professor Michael Welker delivered the Horace De Y. Lentz Memorial Lecture at the Harvard Divinity School. The founding bequest of the triennial lectureship specifies that "some outstanding Christian priest, minister or layman" should speak "upon the inspiring things he may discern in the words: 'Christo et Ecclesiae' which appear upon the Harvard Seal." An edited transcript of Professor Welker's lecture follows.**

In 1977 I came to Harvard for the first time in order to examine Alfred North Whitehead's literary remains. A native of England, Whitehead—mathematician, natural scientist, and philosopher—had taught at Harvard from 1924 onward. To my disappointment I discovered that Whitehead had ordered that all of his unpublished papers be burned after his death, which occurred in 1947. The most important of the few documents preserved in the Houghton library was a copy of F. H. Bradley's *Principles of Logic* bearing Whitehead's critical annotations. In his notes Whitehead emphasizes that a logician must not concentrate only on the universal. The particular and the singular also have their logical structure, which must not be overlooked as one confronts the universal. But how can we avoid the loss of the particular if we want to develop theories of comprehensive realities? How does Whitehead himself avoid neglecting the particular for the sake of the universal, when in his own writings he intends to offer such things as a cosmology, a metaphysics, a theory of religion in the singular, and a comprehensive intellectual and cultural history of modernity?

The answer to this question explains why many readers find Whitehead's writings fascinating, while others find them intimidating. Whitehead thinks in multiple systemic frameworks. If we want to understand reality, we must both distinguish and interrelate natural-scientific, religious, ethical, and aesthetic paradigms and forms of thought. We must develop a multi-systemic, polycontextual way of think-

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ing. Universal theories must be "bridge theories" that enable us both to discover and to appreciate different symbol systems and rationalities, rather than leveling and homogenizing them. This multi-systemic and polycontextual way of thinking has impressed me and occupied my thought ever since my early encounters with Whitehead. Both my study of and my application of this way of thinking have helped me to investigate pluralistic constellations in our societies, scholarly fields, cultures, religions, and canonical traditions. I have learned to distinguish structured forms of pluralism from constellations of mere plurality, diversity, and relationality. The necessity of this distinction becomes clear when we reflect upon the fact that the phenomena of hierarchically structured societies, on the one hand, and of social chaos, on the other, both give evidence of "plurality and diversity." By contrast, pluralism is a complex nexus of interrelated forms that needs to be understood and cultivated.

It was not only in Whitehead that I found developed a multi-systemic and polycontextual way of thinking. In varying degrees, I also encountered such a way of thinking in the writings of several other Harvardians. Such thinking is apparent in the work of Whitehead's student, Susanne Langer, as well as in the work of Langer's student, Clifford Geertz. It surfaces in the later work of the theologian Bernard Lonergan; in some texts of the scholar of religion, Wilfred Cantwell Smith; in the writings of philosopher Nelson Goodman; and in the work of the sociologist Talcott Parsons. It appears as well in the work of the most significant recent German sociologist, Niklas Luhmann, who spent a formative year at Harvard collaborating with Parsons. Two years ago, when I received the invitation to serve as a visiting professor, I began to look forward to new encounters with the "spirit of Harvard" reflected in the work of the scholars I have enumerated.

A few months before the start of my appointment, I received the invitation to deliver the Horace De Y. Lentz Lecture, and to speak about "the inspiring things . . . in the words: 'Christo et Ecclesiae' which appear upon the Harvard seal." At that time I was familiar only with the Harvard coat of arms, which displays three open books whose pages bear the letters of the motto *Veritas*, "Truth"; hence, interpreting the charge of the lectureship was not easy. Had the phrase *Christo et Ecclesiae*, "For Christ and the Church," been at some point added to the Harvard coat of arms, or had that motto been deleted? Did the founder of the lecture want to suggest a conflict between religious and secular interests, or between church and academy? You can well understand that at first glance this invitation did not readily fit into my understanding, based on my encounters with Whitehead and other thinkers, of the "spirit of Harvard."

Research in the Harvard Archives, however, as well as several helpful conversations with current Harvardians,[1] led me to construct a historical picture that bears

[1]For these valuable conversations I am indebted to James F. Coakley, David Lamberth, and Cynthia W. Rossano.

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hardly any traces of unpleasant conflicts between religious and secular postures. To be sure, the three books displayed on Harvard's coat of arms and seal signal that truth is not simple, but complex. If we understand the three books to represent the Hebrew Bible (which Christians call the "Old" or "First" Testament), the New Testament, and the "book of nature," they symbolize a manifold need for "polycontextual" research and understanding. Although in individual coats of arms and seals the third book was represented face down, the historical documents do not indicate a history of conflict. Nor does the double motto on the seal—*Veritas* and *Christo et Ecclesiae*—present any material for a history of conflict, save for one episode. In February 1878, Oliver Wendell Holmes obliged the Harvard Club in New York with two sonnets that caused a certain consternation in cultural and ecclesiastical politics and attracted some irate correspondence. Holmes titled his sonnets " 'Christo et Ecclesiae' 1700" and "1643 'Veritas' 1878." These titles create the impression that, around 1700, *Christo et Ecclesiae* was intruded upon the *Veritas* coat of arms and seal. The impression created by Holmes's titles does not, however, correspond to historical truth.

The inscription *Christo et Ecclesiae* was in use as early as 1693, as is documented by a Harvard seal from that year.[2] An older seal from 1650 bears the motto *In Christi Gloriam* ("To the glory of Christ"). Interestingly, no early Harvard seals carry the motto *Veritas*. But by their representation of the three books they do point beyond the religious and theological sphere. For almost two hundred years the Harvard seal was used without the expression *Veritas*. While researching his *History of Harvard University* (1840), college president Josiah Quincy discovered in the Harvard Archives some intriguing references to the *Veritas* coat of arms. Specifically, Quincy found records of a 1643 meeting of the Board of Overseers in which members discussed the proposal of a coat of arms that is similar to today's coat of arms, and he was able to present the fruit of his research to the Harvard community at the school's bicentennial celebration in 1836.

Several years after Quincy's discovery, the overseers declared on 30 December 1843 that the coat of arms envisioned two hundred years earlier, in 1643, would henceforth be mandatory for Harvard College. In 1847, however, the Corporation followed the urging of President Edward Everett, Quincy's successor, and decided that the seal ought to continue to bear as well the motto *Christo et Ecclesiae*. In 1885 the Corporation specified the design of the seal in the form in which we have it today. In 1935 the Office of the Governing Boards printed a four-page brochure entitled *The Arms of Harvard University: A Guide to their Proper Use*. This docu-

[2]The inscription is identical to the motto of Franeker University in Friesland. The writings of one Franeker instructor, William Ames, were very influential in New England during the early years of Harvard College.

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ment permits the general decorative use of the *Veritas* coat of arms, while reserving the seal, which bears this coat of arms as well as the expression *Christo et Ecclesiae*, for purely academic use.[3]

I think that these preliminary historical observations stake out a territory in which one can meaningfully honor the intentions of this lecture's founder. I have demonstrated that the history of the seal is not a history fraught with conflict; I would, however, like to reflect on several fruitful tensions implicit in the expressions *Christo et Ecclesiae* and *Veritas*. Since the founder also specified that a "priest, minister or layman" should speak, I will begin with a broad perspective, choosing as my point of departure a quotation from Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

Jesus Christ as Cultural Icon (*Kulturfaktor*)

The title of my lecture reproduces a question from Bonhoeffer's prison letters.[4] Bonhoeffer posed his question under the weight of World War II, surrounded by Nazi terror and corrupted religiosity. For academics at the beginning of the third millennium who have appropriated the spirit of late modernity and the sensibilities of pluralistic societies, the question "Who is Jesus Christ for us today?" has an ambiguous sound. On the one hand, with the word "today" it respects the fact that every reference to Jesus Christ is related to a particular time and a particular situation. On the other hand, it leaves the membership of "us" undefined and seems to construe "today" in a global sense. One can hear in the question the media's propensity for large-scale enterprises, for attempting to integrate a contemporary worldwide audience. But one can also hear an uncertainty as well as a defensiveness, a reluctance to consider what historical truth might endure across the centuries.

"Who is Jesus Christ for us today?" It depends, of course, on the community for whom we are speaking, for whom we are posing this question. Members of the so-called Christian societies of Europe and in large parts of North America will answer this question differently from members of societies that are primarily or entirely shaped by other religions. Another very different answer will be formulated in non-Christian environments that have suffered under the imperialism and colonialism of Christian nations. The answers that we receive from the religiously enervated major churches of "the West" will be different from those which we receive from Christians in the countries of Africa, Asia, and Latin America who belong to very dynamic and lively churches and movements of faith. Events that shape global history, such as the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 and the following war, will influence the spectrum of answers, not in the least by strengthening religious fundamentalism both inside and outside Christianity.

[3]Mason Hammond, "A Harvard Armory: Part I," *Harvard Library Bulletin* 29 (1981) 261–63.

[4]Letter of 30 April 1944, published in *Letters and Papers from Prison* (ed. Eberhard Bethge; New York: Macmillan, 1972).

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If we construe "today" broadly, if we seek only an answer to Bonhoeffer's question that has the quantitatively most far-reaching possible validity, if we look to those parts of the world in which the majority of the population has counted itself as Christian over a long span of time, and if we are honest, the first answer will be: Jesus Christ is for many people today first and foremost a cultural icon.

In cultures that have been shaped primarily by Christianity, Jesus Christ is present as a cultural icon in a diversity of ways, most of them latent. He is so present that one has grown accustomed to him, as one has grown accustomed to the church in a German village, or to the American celebration of Halloween and Thanksgiving. The rhythm of the year is established by important holidays that are marked by the life of Jesus in more or less striking ways. Every December, manger scenes with Mary, Joseph, and baby Jesus, the ox, the donkey, and the shepherds, and the angels and the three Wise Men reappear in stores and under Christmas trees. The passage of Good Friday, Easter, the Ascension, and Pentecost, days that commemorate significant events in Jesus' life, marks the progress of the year, though often in secularized and commercialized forms. The rites of passage in the course of individual lives of Christians are religiously structured so that the person and name of Jesus Christ are firmly, if at times only peripherally, attached to central points of the individual's biography. This iconic presence is strengthened by the symbol of the cross, visible not only in almost every church, in cemeteries, and in newspaper obituaries, but also in the form of personal items of jewelry, such as necklaces.

In these predominantly Christian parts of the world, the visual arts, literature, and classical music have made significant contributions to preserving Jesus Christ even to this day as a cultural icon of the first magnitude. If these parts of the world were to choose not only a "person of the year" but also a "person of the millennium," Jesus Christ would probably have already received this title for the second time. All this does not mean, however, that everyone in these regions of the world is animated by a great enthusiasm for Jesus.

In Sunday school the children are asked, "What is brown, has a bushy tail, and jumps from branch to branch?" Freddy answers, "Normally I would say a squirrel. But from what I know about how things are done here, it must be little lord Jesus." This and other well-worn jokes draw attention to Jesus-weariness and Jesus-aversion, just as do various revealing turns of phrase. During my childhood in Berlin, if a man cultivated a full beard and wore sandals, one would hear the disapproving comment, "Him with his Jesus beard and his worn-out Jesus slippers!" Although the jokes and the turns of phrase come and go, when we ask the question "Who is Jesus Christ for us today?" we ought not deceive ourselves: the role of Jesus Christ as a powerful cultural icon goes hand in hand with a widespread weariness of or even aversion to Jesus. It is not only such

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small semantic signals as jokes and side-remarks that demonstrate a defensive reaction to this cultural icon, who is experienced as "out of sync" with the present, or as alien and obtrusive. The defensive reaction becomes particularly clear when persons attempt to communicate religiously about Jesus Christ outside of gathered communities of faith. Even among most of those persons who still engage today in religious discourse of a metaphysical or moral nature, one can expect to see signs of alienation and defensiveness when Jesus Christ is made the focus of religious discourse. "Don't drag your Jesus into our religion"—that is the clear defensive message.

The flip side of this weariness with Jesus is an enthusiasm for "Jesus Christ—Superstar." The rock musical *Jesus Christ Superstar*, written by Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice, was the longest-running musical ever in London's West End. Handel's *Messiah*, Bach's *Christmas Oratorio*, and several other enduring mega-hits of music history could also bear this title. Year after year, major periodicals such as *Time* magazine publish feature articles on Jesus, demonstrating that large parts of the world continue to be in turn attracted and repelled by this person and his life.[5] Jesus as cultural icon gives rise to a remarkable mixture of excitement and weariness, enthusiasm and aversion.

This ambivalence by no means disappears at more profound levels of cultural critique. Let me give three examples. First, one can highlight the fact that an orientation on the person and life of Jesus Christ has served as a means for bringing most of the important elements of the ethos of the Jewish Torah into many regions of the world; among those elements must be noted in particular the complex interconnection of the search for justice, mercy, and the knowledge of truth. Yet many devastating forms of anti-Judaism have attempted to legitimize themselves by reference to Jesus Christ and his life. Second, one can draw attention to the fact that over centuries the model of Jesus has called forth many far-reaching initiatives and reforms in education and medical social service. Yet one can also point to the cultural imperialism and colonialism of Christian mission, whose historical effects have been as powerful as they have been deadly. Third, one can emphasize that Jesus and the reign of God movement have done much to instigate liberation from oppressive patriarchal and class-oriented forms of life. But one can also name overt and especially latent forms in which emphasis on the person of Jesus Christ has provided a religious foundation for androcentrism, racism, and other forms of oppression. Must this profound ambivalence toward Jesus Christ as a powerful cultural icon be our single and ultimate answer to the question, "Who is Jesus Christ for us today?"

[5]For example, *Time* magazine recently published a long article by David van Biema entitled "Jerusalem at the Time of Jesus" (16 April 2001, 46–56). The cover of the issue that contained the article bore the headline, "What Jesus Saw."

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Who is Jesus Christ For Us Today in Truth-Seeking Communities?

"Truth-seeking communities"—I am indebted to John Polkinghorne for this expression[6]—are not to be confused with groups that announce more or less loudly that they have found the truth and now possess it. Truth-seeking communities are groups of human beings that not only raise truth claims, but also develop and practice open and public forms and procedures in which these truth claims are subjected to critical and self-critical examination. The academy, active in research and education, is one such truth-seeking community. Such communities may be further described as communities that advance processes in which certainty and consensus can be developed, interrogated, and strengthened. At the same time, however, they are to guard against reducing truth to certainty and consensus. Moreover, truth-seeking communities advance processes in which complex states of affairs can be made accessible in repeatable and predictable ways. At the same time, however, they are to guard against reducing truth to the repeatable, predictable, and correct investigation of the subject under consideration.

The path of the search for truth can be adequately characterized only through an appreciation of the reciprocal relation between, on the one hand, the interrogation and strengthening of certainty and consensus and, on the other hand, the repeatable, predictable, and correct investigation of the subject under consideration. The route of the truth-seeking community can be traveled only in open and public critical and self-critical discourse.[7]

We ought not to make light of the accomplishment, the worth, and the blessing of truth-seeking communities, even though we must self-critically take account of the fact that these communities are always also guided by other interests: for example, by the search for maximum resonance and for moral and political influence, and even by vanity and the individual desire for power and control. The sober recognition that there are no pure and perfect truth-seeking communities can help us to balance appreciation and self-critique. It behooves us to be very careful about the blind self-privileging of academic work. We must not attach lesser value to "justice-seeking communities" or to communities that aim at "physical and psychic therapy and the restoration of health." We also have the obligation to respect

[6]John Polkinghorne, *The Faith of a Physicist* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994) 149; idem, *Faith, Science and Understanding* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000) 29–30; John Polkinghorne and Michael Welker, *Faith in the Living God: A Dialogue* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001) ch. 9.

[7]See Michael Welker, "Theology in Public Discourse Outside Communities of Faith?," in *Religion, Pluralism, and Public Life: Abraham Kuyper's Legacy for the Twenty-First Century* (ed. Luis E. Lego; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000) 110–22; idem, "Bezwingende Gewissheit—Befreiende Wahrheit: Selbstgewissheit, Wahrheitsgewissheit, Glaubensgewissheit," in *Festschrift für Wilfried Härle* (ed. U. Andree, F. Miege, and C. Schwöbel; Marburg: Elwert Verlag, 2001) 107–12.

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communities that seek "political loyalty and a corresponding exercise of influence," communities that seek "economic and monetary success," and communities that seek to maximize "public attention and resonance." It is characteristic of pluralistic societies that truth-seeking communities do not absolutize themselves, but that they recognize and delineate their important and indispensable contributions for the entire culture, and enable those contributions to be perceived in other contexts as well.

Against this background, what does the relationship between the academy and religious communities look like? Within the framework of my theme I will concentrate on the relationship between the academy and Christian churches. Many Christian churches today are marked by an "uncertainty about their public role."[8] Should they count themselves primarily among the truth-seeking communities—along with and prior to their other undeniable tasks? Or should they aim primarily at acquiring politico-moral loyalty and exercising a corresponding influence? Should they aim at effectively achieving resonance and providing entertainment? Should they aim at therapeutic accomplishment?

Since this is a divinity school lecture, it is strongly tempting to recommend that the academy should encourage religions and churches to strengthen or to regain their close overlap with truth-seeking communities. Not politics, or the media, or the medical system, but the academy, engaged in teaching and research, should—in deference to historical precedent—remain, become, or return to being the primary partner of religion. Yet such a recommendation must today face the vexing question: Given a religion and church centered on Jesus Christ, a religion and church that sees itself, in whatever form, as "grounded" on Jesus Christ, is such a religion at all capable of being recognized as a truth-seeking community? Is it at all capable, taking its grounding and central content as its point of departure, of making and examining truth claims on an academic level? As a powerful but highly ambivalent cultural icon, has not Jesus Christ long since receded from the reach of the question of truth? Is not this cultural icon something that can be approached—be it enthusiastically or be it out of necessity—only with moral, political, media-focused, and perhaps even economic calculations? It is important to recognize that centuries of certainty-seeking and insight-seeking in an academic context are more than a little responsible for this precarious situation. In the face of the academic search for truth, not only the "dogmatic Christ" but also the "historical Jesus" has fractured into a plethora of images of Jesus.

In his book *Jesus through the Centuries: His Place in the History of Culture*,[9] Jaroslav Pelikan compiled an abundance of such images, each of which—in a

[8]Wolfgang Huber, "Öffentliche Kirche in pluralen Öffentlichkeiten," *Evangelische Theologie* 54 (1994) 157–80.

[9]Jaroslav Pelikan, *Jesus through the Centuries: His Place in the History of Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985).

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particular age and milieu—claimed to represent "Jesus Christ for us today." We may cull from Pelikan's catalog a veritable litany of such images: Jesus as the turning point of history, as the light of the Gentiles, as the king of kings, as the cosmic Christ, as the Son of Man, as the true image of God, as the crucified Christ, as the bridegroom of the soul, as the mirror of the eternal, as the prince of peace, as the teacher of common sense, as the liberator, etc. Historical evaluation of these and other images of Jesus in their specific contexts fosters the growing conviction that, since there is no way for us to avoid making an image of Jesus, any critical engagement with these images in the name of reality and truth is in principle meaningless. Since there is no way to avoid the subjective, the temporally conditioned, and that which is conditioned by self-interest, the struggle of truth-seeking communities is in principle futile with regard to Jesus Christ. The truth-seekers are only people who only think they know better, when in fact they do not.

For many decades there seemed to be simply no way out of this situation, due to an almost universal consensus in academic theology. Not only did this consensus hold that religious, academic, and other references to Jesus Christ both past and present disintegrate into a plethora of images of Jesus. It also held that Jesus' own life is completely hidden behind a plethora of mere Jesus-images and religious expectations. We can not penetrate beyond these images to the reality of Jesus' life. Therefore the search for truth is futile, even hypocritical. What has so radically transformed this crippling situation?

The Old and the New Quests for the Historical Jesus: A Paradigm Shift

Scholars do not doubt the fact that Jesus lived. "There are in any case four completely preserved biographies and quite a number of biographical fragments," reckons one author, noting that "No other figure of antiquity reaches this number."[10] We have early testimonies from non-Christian and non-Jewish writers, two of them almost contemporary with Jesus' life (those of Thallos and Mara bar Serapion), the others several decades after his death, in a variety of languages and in a broad "range of opinion: from those perhaps sympathetic to Christ (Mara); through those moderately hostile (Pliny) and those fully hostile but descriptive (Tacitus, Suetonius); to those not interested in description, but who vigorously attack Christianity and in the process attack Christ (Lucian and Celsus)."[11] Yet in spite of this ample testimony to the fact of Jesus' existence, for several decades theological research had nonetheless assumed that we could not really approach the historical Jesus, because we encounter him only, as they say, "covered in layers of legend" in the biblical texts.[12]

[10]Klaus Berger, *Wer war Jesus wirklich?* (Stuttgart: Quell Verlag, 1995) 21ff.

[11]Robert E. Van Voorst, *Jesus Outside the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000) 68.

[12]"No one is any longer in the position to write a life of Jesus." With this sentence Guenther Bornkamm began his famous book *Jesus of Nazareth* (New York: Harper, 1960; repr., Minne-

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In this view, the biblical testimonies themselves yield their own plethora of images of Jesus. Chief among these are those images associated with Mark, Paul, Matthew, Luke and John. Mark, for example, lays particular stress on Jesus' contests with demons, for such contests demonstrate that already in this world the Son of God operates victoriously. According to Paul, Christians are taken into living communion with the risen and exalted Christ; they are adopted through the Spirit just as Jesus was established as the Son of God by the Father at the resurrection. Matthew sees in Jesus a second Moses who, in both continuity and discontinuity with the Torah, establishes a new teaching: he intends to integrate Jews and Christians into "a *corpus permixtum*, with internal tolerance and outwardly an 'aristocratic' self-confidence to be the 'light of the world.' "[13] Luke sees Jesus—already filled with the Spirit even before his earthly birth—gaining human beings through the Spirit for the reign of God. Finally, John's Jesus wants to bring human beings into his eternal communion with the Father through a new birth in the power of the Spirit. This new birth occurs in the midst of a conflict between the Roman lords of this world and the true authority of Jesus, who acts as servant and friend.[14]

It is, of course, both necessary and possible to refine these diverse images and to investigate overlaps between them. But their very number renders problematic every search for "the" great coherence and convergence between them. If we seek, however, only the least common denominator among them, we achieve but a hazy sketch based on sparse data, with which we can do little either historically or religiously.[15] In contrast to this—as it was often labeled—"disillusioning" view, several decades of *Sitz im Leben* research, of socio-historical and socio-rhetorical exegesis, and of socio-historical research in other areas, as well as dominant developments of contemporary history (*Zeitgeschichte*) in general have led to a paradigm shift that has created new presuppositions in the search for the historical Jesus.

Casting a glance backward, I would like to propose that we call the old search for the historical Jesus "archaeologistic." This name is not intended to denigrate archaeology's interests in objectification. On the contrary, such interests are as indispensable to historical scholarship as is the exact dating of events. However, the emphasis in historical scholarship on an empiricity that can pinpoint exact locations in space and time tumbles into a naive objectivism when a complex historical setting and a web of textual traditions are treated like archaeological digs.

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apolis: Fortress, 1995), which has gone through fifteen German editions and has been translated into many languages. For a long time most New Testament scholars agreed with him.

[13]Gerd Theissen, *Gospel Writing and Church Politics: A Socio-Rhetorical Approach* (Hong Kong: CUHK, 2001) 166.

[14]Ibid.

[15]See Robert W. Funk and the Jesus Seminar, *The Acts of Jesus: The Search for the Authentic Deeds of Jesus* (San Francisco: Harper, 1998) 527.

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In his widely-noted Jesus books, among them *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant*[16] and *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography*,[17] John Dominic Crossan has revived this "archaeologism." With a multilevel textual archaeology he seems to have met the profound scholarly doubt regarding the possibility of research into the life of Jesus with a true triumph of the archaeologistic procedure. Crossan examines 522 biblical and extra-biblical references to Jesus in the period 30–150 C.E. He attaches special weight to those textual units that are both early and that enjoy multiple independent attestation: 42 units are independently attested three times, and 33 units are independently attested more than three times. According to Crossan, the image of Jesus that emerges from this body of data is the image of a revolutionary Mediterranean Jewish peasant.

The historical Jesus radically called into question both of the fundamental structures of ancient society: familial relations and political relations. In opposition to the relationships of dominion in family and politics in his day, Jesus practices open table fellowship, which welcomes sinners and tax collectors and which also—at table and in table conversation—initiates first the critique of and subsequently the struggle against the dominant relations. Jesus' preaching, which talks about the coming reign of God, does not aim at some reality beyond this life. Rather, Jesus' preaching is to be realized in the practice of God's reign by those who attend to very basic human needs: health, nourishment, and life together in freedom. The new reality of the coming reign of God shall flourish in the open table fellowship of men and women, clean and unclean, slaves and slaveholders. A rural house mission that flows into a community movement, which in turn undermines the dominant familial and political relationships—this is how Crossan reconstructs the preaching and the influence of the earthly Jesus.

Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza has rightly called attention to both the open and latent "politics of interpretation" that go hand in hand with such an objectivistic "stratigraphic method." She criticizes Crossan, but she also criticizes his critics, such as Dale Allison, who in his book *Jesus of Nazareth: Millenarian Prophet* proposes in opposition to Crossan a "millenarian model" of Jesus' eschatological orientation.[18] "One cannot simply marshal textual evidence in one or the other direction," she writes, underlining the necessity of a self-critical approach to the models employed by scholars as well as to their academic and political effect and influence.[19] The archaeologism revived by Crossan, which enabled him to resume the old quest for the historical Jesus, also guaranteed him success in the publishing

[16]John Dominic Crossan, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (San Francisco: Harper, 1991).

[17]Idem, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography* (San Francisco: Harper, 1994).

[18]Dale Allison, *Jesus of Nazareth: Millenarian Prophet* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998).

[19]Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Jesus and the Politics of Interpretation* (New York: Continuum, 2000) 111.

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world. Crossan's recent collaboration with Jonathan L. Reed, *Excavating Jesus: Beneath the Stones, Behind the Texts,* enthusiastically celebrates the possibilities of archaeologism in its boast that "Archaeology excavates and can excavate Jesus not just by digging up where he lived or traveled, but by filling out as completely as possible the social world in which he operated."[20] Ironically, the publishing success of these archaeologistic contributions happened and continues to happen in a field of research in which a new paradigm of "the historical" had long since made its presence felt.

In this new paradigm of "the historical" we begin with the assumption that at any and every point in time and space we can, in principle, open a continuum of memory and expectation. At every point both past and present we can, in principle, draw out a horizon constituted by past, present, and future. Historians must give account for their choice of both the primary contexts of memory and expectation and the bearers of those contexts, who in turn must be historically accessible. Historians must also reckon with the possibility of other contexts of memory and expectation which stand in temporal and spatial proximity to their chosen contexts, but which produce divergent representations of historical persons and events. Concretely, we must consider the likelihood that Jesus had a different impact on the rural population of Galilee than he did on the urban population of Jerusalem. We must consider the likelihood that those who wished to hold high the Mosaic law or the Temple cult in the face of the Roman occupation perceived Jesus differently than did those who wanted to embrace Roman culture. We must consider the likelihood that the testimony of those whom Jesus met with healing and acceptance must differ from the testimony of those whose main impression of Jesus was drawn from his conflicts with Rome and Jerusalem.

It is the life of the historical Jesus itself that gives rise to and nourishes a specific multiplicity of expectations and experiences. It is this life which opens a specific space for images of Jesus that stand in tension, even in conflict with one another. This refined view of "the historical" enables us to see that the despairing archaeologistic search for the mere convergence in spatio-temporal localization of a bodily existence, not to speak of the search for the least common denominator, is a misguided endeavor. Historically important and revealing are precisely those differences and tensions between clusters of biblical testimony that are in themselves coherent and consistent. Crossan's agricultural table-fellowship certainly deserves careful attention as one feature of the Jesus tradition. But by way of contrast, I would like to focus on two quite different contextualizations of the life of Jesus that suggest other possible environments and traditions toward which the quest for historical truth might be directed.

[20]John Dominic Crossan and Jonathan L. Reed, *Excavating Jesus: Beneath the Stones, Behind the Texts* (San Francisco: Harper, 2001) xvii. See also Jonathan L. Reed, *Archaeology and the Galilean Jesus: A Re-Examination of the Evidence* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press, 2000).

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Geza Vermes, professor of Jewish Studies at Oxford, has produced a series of books that understand Jesus' mission as a mission to the children of Israel (Matt 15:24).[21] Jesus, who calls the Gentiles "dogs" (Mk 7:27; Matt 7:6), belongs to that rural Galilean population regarded as uneducated by the Pharisees and scribes. Jesus' association with the unclean and with sinners, prostitutes, and tax collectors fits this picture. Jesus' ongoing opposition to purity rites and the temple cult escalates and hastens toward explosion at the very moment in which he moves beyond the territory of Galilee to Jerusalem. Vermes emphasizes the practices of exorcism, healing, and the forgiveness of sins more than Crossan does. He locates Jesus within the tradition of charismatic Judaism in Galilee, which understood itself to be the tradition that bore the mantle of the Old Testament "men of God." Vermes stresses the realism in the parables of God's reign. The reign of God is to be understood much more strongly from the perspective of its growth and development than from the perspective of its instantiation in actual and symbolic table fellowship and other social activities.

A third interesting shift in context is offered in the book *The Historical Jesus*, by my Heidelberg colleagues Gerd Theissen and Annette Merz.[22] They make particular reference to, as they put it, Jesus' extraordinary "power to attract and provoke": Jesus was a charismatic who "implicitly attributed to himself a special nearness to God" and to that extent entered into a struggle with all the messianic role expectations in Israel. However, awakening and problematizing messianic expectations had fateful consequences for Jesus, who "was crucified by the Romans because of the messiahship attributed to him by the people." According to Theissen and Merz, the only so-called honorific title that Jesus applied to himself was the expression "human one/son of man," an "everyday expression which was first given messianic connotations by him—however, Jesus linked it with visions of a heavenly being who was like a human one/son of man."[23]

Theissen and Merz's reconstruction comes across as somewhat less worldly, somewhat more idealistic than those offered by Crossan and Vermes. On the other hand, the great significance that they attach to the title "Human One" complements the Easter "belief in a transformed 'human being' who does not cease to be God's creature even beyond the frontier of death." Theissen and Merz comment, "These new perspectives released an utopian power, so that by the assimilation of

[21]Geza Vermes, *Jesus the Jew: A Historian's Reading of the Gospels* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981); idem, *Jesus and the World of Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984); idem, *The Religion of Jesus the Jew* (London: SCM, 1993); idem, *The Changing Faces of Jesus* (New York: Viking, 2001).

[22]Gerd Theissen and Annette Merz, *The Historical Jesus: A Comprehensive Guide* (trans. John Bowden; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998).

[23]Ibid., 560–61. I have altered the English translation of the last extract in this paragraph.

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all men and women to this 'new human being' traditional differences between peoples, classes and sexes could be overcome. . . . Reflection on Jesus today may see him as a kind of metamorphosis of the human."[24]

These diverse presentations of Jesus' life refer to different dimensions of that life. They provoke many questions: Was it really that way? Can these differences be plausibly integrated into that life? They also exemplify the multidimensional influence of that life, which has spoken to the most diverse experiences of sorrow and need, of oppression and lack of orientation, and which continues to do so to this day. The new questioning concerning the historical Jesus is a polycontextual questioning. It requires a particular academic virtue. On the one hand, historical scholarship—by all means in connection with archaeological emphases—must be continued in specific contexts. On the other hand, intercontextual scholarship must be kept open to insights in other spaces of memory and expectation. The diverse processes of strengthening certainty and consensus while progressively deepening the knowledge of the subject under investigation must be simultaneously kept distinct and set in relation to each other. These stipulations will provoke numerous methodological, hermeneutical, and historical questions, as well as questions about theories of pluralism. Within the framework of my topic I do not wish to pursue these questions directly. Rather I would like to ask, from the perspective of the discipline of systematic theology, whether the challenging and complex processes of truth-seeking that I have described can also be brought into relation to one another in terms of systematic theology and christology.

Does my sketch of the new quest for the historical Jesus point to something beyond the interesting task of reconstructing a multidimensional web of conflicts and resistances? Such a web of religious, political, cultural, and social conflicts about norms, values, power, and interests in different yet interdependent contexts is certainly of interest to scholars in many academic disciplines. The sustained investigation of this web of religious, political, cultural, and social conflicts in Israel at the beginning of the common era may therefore be highly instructive for nonexegetical and nonhistorical research. But what does this have to do with our question, "Who is Jesus Christ for us today?"

Reconceiving the Risen Jesus Christ

I would like to argue that it is no accident that against the background of historical research that I have described, the theme of "resurrection" has reentered the systematic-theological discussion. For a long time, a theology concerned about its academic reputation skirted this theme or at best treated it under the rubric of existentialist and supernaturalist figures of thought. Systematic theology stood seemingly helpless in the face of biblical talk about the "spiritual

[24]Ibid., 562.

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body" of the risen Christ, his "bodily" presence "in the Spirit and in faith." This helplessness was heightened time and again by various New Testament scholars who made a predictable splash in the media by reminding the public that although the resurrection texts of the New Testament speak of a reanimation of the dead Jesus, modern human beings simply will not be persuaded that dead persons can be reanimated. Therefore the reality of the resurrection must be called into question.[25]

In response to such reasoning, Wolfhart Pannenberg and others proposed that we take account not of the reports of personal encounters with the risen Jesus per se, but only of the appearances of light attested in the resurrection witnesses preserved in the New Testament.[26] According to this view, experiences involving appearances of light and visions, to which historicity can be attributed, are the foundation of the testimonies to the resurrection. This proposal, however, remained unsatisfactory, not only because it had to omit from consideration the synoptic resurrection accounts, but also because it left open the question of just how the pre-Easter Jesus could have been perceived in a new form in such appearances of light. Ultimately, recognition of the indispensable pluriformity of the resurrection testimonies led the inquiry out of this cul-de-sac. How could clarity result from an approach that apparently makes the situation even more complex?

The biblical testimonies to the resurrection present a complicated picture. They consistently emphasize the tension between, on the one hand, palpable impression and, on the other hand, experience of an appearance. They consistently emphasize the tension between theophany and doubt with regard to the resurrection. No single testimony gives the impression that the risen Christ lived together with the witnesses as did the pre-Easter Jesus. That a witness should offer the greeting, "How good to see you back again, Jesus!" would be unthinkable. The resurrection of Jesus is not just a physical reanimation. Much more happens in Jesus' resurrection than in the raising of Lazarus or of Jairus's daughter. Although a few resurrection testimonies, if we isolate them, seem to suggest a confusion of resurrection with reanimation, the biblical material gives a clear overall picture.[27]

[25]Cf. two representatives of this line of argument: Rudolf Bultmann, "Neues Testament und Mythologie. Das Problem der Entmythologisierung der neutestamentlichen Verkündigung," in Kerygma und Mythos, Bd. 1 (1941; repr., Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1988); *Gerd* Lüdemann, *Die Auferstehung Jesu. Historie, Erfahrung, Theologie (*Vandenhoeck: Göttingen, 1994); idem, "Zwischen Karfreitag und Ostern," in *Osterglaube ohne Auferstehung? Diskussion mit Gerd Lüdemann* (ed. Hansjürgen Verweyen; Freiburg: Herder, 1995) 13–15.

[26]Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Grundzüge der Christologie* (6th ed.; Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlag, 1982) 85–87.

[27]See Michael Welker, "Die Gegenwart des auferstandenen Christus als das Wesentliche des Christentums," in *Das ist christlich: Nachdenken über das Wesen des Christentums* (ed. W. Härle, H. Schmidt, and M. Welker; Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlag, 2000) 91–103.

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The Emmaus story is particularly revealing. The eyes of the disciples are kept from recognizing the risen Christ until the ritual of the breaking of the bread, when their eyes are opened. But immediately the next verse reports, "And he vanished from their sight." Instead of complaining about a ghost, the disciples reevaluate a second evidentiary experience, which had not initially borne revelatory force: "Were not our hearts burning within us as while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?" (Lk 24:30–32). The witnesses recognize the risen Christ in his speaking to them, in the breaking of bread, in the greeting of peace, in his opening to them the scriptures, and in other signs. The risen Christ is also manifest in appearances of light, and such appearances forbid the confusion of resurrection with mere physical reanimation. What is important is that a multiplicity of different evidentiary experiences occasion the certainty of the witnesses as well as their proclamation that Christ is and remains present among us in a bodily way! By contrast, the stories of the empty tomb show that a single, albeit spectacular, revelation by heavenly messengers does not in itself lead to faith. Instead, the results of the revelation as portrayed in Mark's gospel are fear, amazement, and silence. Or, as in Luke's gospel, the tomb visions are dismissed as "idle women-talk." Or rumors that the body has been stolen circulate, as the gospels of Matthew and John suggest.

The certainty that Christ is risen does not mean that Christ is now present in the same way as the pre-Easter Jesus was present. Instead the whole fullness of Christ's person and life is present "in the Spirit and in faith." From a naturalistic and scientistic viewpoint, it is hard to make sense of this presence of the whole fullness of a person and a life "in the Spirit and in faith."[28] Such an approach thus stumbles repeatedly over the evidence for and against a physical reanimation. By contrast, the risen Christ becomes present in a way that retains the multidimensionality of his person and influence, as well as the multidimensionality of access to his person and influence. The powers of love, the powers of forgiveness, the powers of healing, the powers of special attention to children, to the weak, to the rejected, to the sick, and to the suffering are communicated by the presence of the risen Christ. Important struggles with the so-called "principalities and powers"—for example, with political and religious powers in the search for justice and in the search for truth—also take shape in the presence of the risen Christ. The person and life of Jesus Christ thus make available a multiplicity of powers for transformation and renewal.

Convictions regarding the identity of the pre-Easter Jesus and the risen Christ grow out of experiences that can accurately be termed "testimonies." This term points to, on the one hand, the personal authenticity and certainty of the experience and, on the other hand, its fragmentary and perspectival character. Francis Fiorenza

[28]See J. Polkinghorne and M. Welker, eds., *The End of the World and the Ends of God: Theology and Science on Eschatology* (Harrisburg, Pa.: Trinity Press, 2000).

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has recently emphasized that this plural character of testimony is indispensable. Furthermore, he has demonstrated that these necessarily multiple testimonies strive toward metaphorical speech as they point to each other and seek to thematize the complex reality which they represent from their diverse perspectives. Finally, he has called attention to the fact that these testimonies seek an anchoring in actual and symbolic actions that become ritual forms.[29] The testimonies to the resurrection are triggered by the act of address, by the breaking of bread, by the greeting of peace, by the opening of the scriptures, and by other ritualizable actions and signs.

By preserving the immediacy of the fullness of the life of the risen Christ, faith has the power to give access to deeper insight and knowledge. Neither is this power of faith a matter of indifference in secular thought. Think of a loved one who has died, and ask yourself, Who is she? Is she the child in the yellowed photograph? Is she the shadow in the dim recollections from my own early days of childhood? Is she the robust person to whom I related for large parts of my life? Is she the drawn, emaciated face into whose eyes I looked with great sadness as she lay on her deathbed? The answer will be: She is all of these—and she is much more than these few retrospective glances at an entire life can reveal. But "all of these" incomplete views accompany us, at least in the depths of our life and experience. What forms of insight and knowledge are appropriate for rendering "all of these" perspectives present? At this level the struggle for theological insight is charged with a broader import that has a bearing on nonreligious experience and insight.

Sarah Coakley has recently called attention to the fact that an epistemology of the resurrection testimonies must take note of the polyphony of senses addressed by the resurrection. "Our continuing difficulties in expressing the reality of a risen Christ who cannot finally be grasped, but rather 'seen'—'not with the eyes only,' "[30] are to be traced back to a plenitude of knowledge that cannot be accurately reproduced by our scholarly discourse. In a multi-year interdisciplinary discourse with natural scientists, we investigated one of the forms in which insights into the resurrection can be described in a way that is accessible to scholarly reflection. I have proposed calling this form "living cultural memory" or "canonic memory." What is the nature of this type of memory?

In his book *The Cultural Memory*, the Heidelberg Egyptologist Jan Assmann has investigated various forms of shared communal memory.[31] He distinguishes

[29]Francis Schüssler Fiorenza, "The Resurrection of Jesus and Roman Catholic Fundamental Theology," in *The Resurrection: An Interdisciplinary Symposium on the Resurrection of Jesus* (ed. S. T. Davis, D. Kendall, and G. O'Collins; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997) 213–48, esp. 238–41.

[30]Sarah Coakley, "The Resurrection and the 'Spiritual Senses': On Wittgenstein, Epistemology and the Risen Christ," in *Powers and Submission: Spirituality, Philosophy and Gender* (Oxford:Blackwell, 2002) forthcoming.

[31]Jan Assmann, *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis* (Munich: Beck, 1992); idem., "Was ist das 'kulturelle Gedächtnis'?," in *Religion und kulturelles Gedächtnis* (Munich: Beck, 2000) 11–44. Assmann

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"communicative memory," which always remains fluid, which is continually being enriched, and which is also continually disappearing, from formed, stabilized, and organized memory, which he calls "cultural memory."[32] Events such as the French Revolution, the Civil War, and the attacks of 11 September 2001 mark our cultural memory, giving it enduring content, bases for orientation, and directions for learning. When a cultural memory is codified in a plurality of different interpretations, I have argued, the cultural memory potentiates itself and becomes a "canonic memory." A structured and bounded pluralism of interpretations leads to a necessarily restless memory that continually calls forth new interpretations without losing its centering.

The Christian faith affirms the vitality and inexhaustibility of the canonic memory of the risen Christ by desiring to cultivate this memory until Christ's *parousia*. Living canonic memory is oriented toward a future that remains beyond its control, because it moves toward that future out of many contexts that are all concentrated on it. An anti-ideological and anti-triumphalistic power lies in this canonic memory as it grows ever anew out of many testimonies. It is a communicative, critical, and self-critical memory. Canonic memory seeks certainty and growth in certainty. At the same time it examines, relativizes, and corrects certainty in an ever-renewed quest for truth.

Christo et Ecclesiae and *Veritas*: In the context of our examination of the expressions found in Harvard's seal, we have again asked Bonhoeffer's question, "Who is Jesus Christ for us today?" We found that in many dominantly Christian environments Jesus Christ is today a mere cultural icon. Truth-seeking communities, however, should work to bring canonic memory into play to such an extent that Jesus' earthly life before and beyond his death shines forth in a multiform provision of testimony. Authentic, honest historical thought and what faith calls "proclamation" must not be sundered from each other. It is in the interplay of fragmentary testimonies—gaining all the while a complex subtlety and, at the same time, consistency and convincing impact—that truth makes its way.

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builds on the work of Maurice Halbwachs *(Les cadres sociaux de la memoire* [Paris: F. Alcan, 1925]) and Claude Lévi-Strauss *(La pensée sauvage* [Paris: Plon, 1962]), as well as the work of other scholars who have investigated the potential of memory.

[32]Assmann, *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis*, 48–51.

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