ANCIENT, POSTMODERN, AND PROPHETIC: HOW HAIGHT'S SYMBOL THEORY (ALMOST) DOES IT ALL

Mark S. Clatterbuck
The Catholic University of America

ABSTRACT

The achievements of Roger Haight's provocative book *Jesus Symbol of God* rise and fall according to the strengths—and weaknesses—of Haight's symbol theory as applied to his christological project. While this essay expresses a largely positive view of Haight's overall project, it focuses on two key shortcomings pertaining to Haight's symbol theory as it shapes his Christology: first, that his notion of symbol is too low to serve traditional Christology; second, that Haight strips religious symbols of their prophetic power by conceding too much to his audience. Drawing on the symbol theories of Karl Rahner and Paul Ricoeur, to whom Haight is deeply indebted for his understanding of symbol, a path is indicated by which Haight's model could more adequately wed symbol theory and Christology in yielding a more fruitful understanding of Jesus as symbol of God.

I. Introduction

It seems that the controversy surrounding Jesuit theologian Roger Haight's *Jesus Symbol of God* has subsided recently.[1] That probably comes as a relief to the author following the "Notification" the book received courtesy of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in December 2004. That document condemns the book on no less than seven counts of "serious doctrinal errors," and forbids Haight from teaching as a Catholic theologian.[2] One week after the "Notification"

[1]Roger Haight, *Jesus Symbol of God* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1999).

[2]See Joseph Ratzinger and Angelo Amato, "Notification on the Book, *Jesus Symbol of God*" in *L'Osservatore Romano*, February 7–8, 2005; also accessible at http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/ rc_con_cfaith_doc_20041213_notification-fr-haight_en.html (accessed 18 September 2007). The document is signed December 13, 2004. The statement highlights seven distinct ways in which Haight's book violates "truths of divine and Catholic faith," namely: theological method, the pre-existence of the Word, the divinity of Jesus, the Trinity, the salvific value of the death of Jesus, the unicity and universality of the salvific mediation of Jesus and of the Church, and the Resurrection of Jesus. The "Notification" bans Haight from teaching Catholic theology "until such time as his positions are corrected to be in complete conformity with the doctrine of the Church" (see "Conclusion").

Mark S. Clatterbuck is currently a doctoral candidate in Religion and Culture at The Catholic University of America (Washington, DC 20064). His dissertation is entitled "Searching for Souls in a Twice-Foreign Land: An Analysis of Catholic Indian Missions through The Indian Sentinel *(1902–1962)." He teaches religion and writing in the Department of English and Humanities at York College of Pennsylvania.*

HORIZONS 34/2 (2007): 265–91

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0360966900004436 Published online by Cambridge University Press

was published in *L'Osservatore Romano* (February 2005), the Board of Directors of the Catholic Theological Society of America (CTSA) responded by expressing its "profound distress" over the way in which the CDF handled its case against Haight. Their response expressed particular concern that, while the book "has done a great service in framing crucial questions that need to be addressed today," the censuring of the text "will most likely discourage debates over the book, effectively stifling further criticism and undermining our ability as Catholic theologians to openly critique our colleagues."[3] They also noted that Haight himself has been a gracious and eager participant in the debates generated by his book, and has welcomed criticism from the start.[4]

The present essay intentionally avoids direct engagement with the Vatican's disciplining of Haight; I limit comments on the controversy to my conclusion. Instead, I intend to follow the course proposed by the CTSA, whereby the community of theologians engages in "lively debate" with one another, encouraging creative advances and correcting perceived errors in contemporary Catholic theology. Perhaps it will play a small part in helping to keep the public conversation going on some of the urgent issues raised in Haight's controversial and courageous work.[5] More specifically, I will focus on the symbol theory employed by Haight, given its critical role in both the successes and shortcomings of his enormous undertaking.

Haight claims from the outset that his christological project fulfills the dual exigencies of being faithful to the Christian theological tradition while also being consistent with the demands of a postmodern age. Among the book's considerable contributions is a meticulously crafted presentation of Jesus which is radically informed by hermeneutics and an apologetic orientation aimed at an audience which has become increasingly alienated from the classical Christian message. Underlying this portrait of Jesus is an extensive symbol theory which functions

[3]See "Statement of the Board of Directors, The Catholic Theological Society of America: With Respect to the Notification Issued by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith Concerning the Book, *Jesus: Symbol of God*, by Rev. Roger Haight, S.J. and Prohibiting Fr. Haight from Teaching Catholic Theology" (February 2005), http://www.jcu.edu/ctsa/haight.html (accessed 18 September 2007).

[4]For example, note Haight's willingness to engage critical observations on *Jesus Symbol of God* during an open forum on the book at the 2002 CTSA Annual Convention. On his welcoming and engaging responses to other critics, see Roger Haight, "Response to Robert Masson," in *Christology: Memory, Inquiry, Practice,* ed. Anne M. Clifford and Anthony J. Godzieba, College Theology Society Annual Volume 48 (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2003): 87-91; and idem, "Traditional Christology for Our Time: A Response to Edward Jeremy Miller," *Horizons* 27 (2000): 164–84.

[5]Even Haight's critics concede that this is indeed "a courageous book" which "does not skirt tough topics." See Edward Jeremy Miller, "*Jesus Symbol of God*: Does It Work?" *Horizons* 27 (2000): 164, 171.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0360966900004436 Published online by Cambridge University Press

admirably in supporting Haight's christological achievements. At the same time, there are critical problems which remain unresolved in Haight's development and application of symbol theory—problems which, at times, compromise the notable achievements of his project.

In the present essay, I offer first an overview of Haight's symbol theory as developed in the book *Jesus Symbol of God*, beginning with an examination of how his methodological orientation gives rise to that theory. Next, I examine the implications of this symbol theory when applied to Jesus of Nazareth in the sense intended by Haight when he claims that, for Christians, Jesus is the central concrete symbol of God. A critique of the theory and its application are then offered in the second half of the essay. There I offer three points of criticism, placing what I believe to be the two most serious problems in conversation with the symbol theories of Karl Rahner and Paul Ricoeur.

I should note from the start that I am decidedly sympathetic to Haight's project, and that my hope for this essay is to extend the circle of constructive conversation surrounding his work. The points of criticism I offer are in no way intended as dismissals of his work, but rather as starting points for an even sharper articulation of a christology consistent with an admittedly daunting trinity of criteria: faithfulness to the Christian tradition, consistency with a postmodern worldview, and prophetic in its practical application.

II. Haight's Methodological Orientation: Inculturation and Hermeneutics

Haight's symbol theory as applied to theological discourse is intimately connected to his project of reinterpreting the ancient Christian message for a postmodern audience. In the preface to his book, he places his project within the context of the larger Roman Catholic, and especially Jesuit, efforts at inculturation since Vatican II. Haight understands inculturation as "the incarnation of Christian faith and life within the diversity of human experiences that are codified in the languages, ideas, values, and behavior patterns that make up a culture or subculture."[6] While cultural boundaries have traditionally been marked along geographical or ethnic lines, Haight makes a case that

[6]Haight, *Jesus*, xi (hereafter, page references appear in parentheses in the text). The precedent for referencing the Incarnation as the basis for inculturation is rooted in the documents of Vatican II, especially *Ad Gentes* (see, for example, paragraph 22). On the history of the term "inculturation," including the role of Jesuits in the shaping and implementation of the concept, see Anscar J. Chupungco, *Liturgical Inculturation: Sacramentals, Religiosity, and Catechesis* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1992), 25–27. For the brief but pivotal document in which the Jesuits formally committed themselves to exploring and engaging the concept of inculturation, see "The Work of Inculturation of the Faith and Promotion of Christian Life" from the 32nd General Congregation of the

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0360966900004436 Published online by Cambridge University Press

postmodern society constitutes a distinct sub-culture which transcends national boundaries, arguing that postmodernity best characterizes the "current intellectual milieu of western industrial societies" (xi).[7] Elizabeth Johnson is among those who have praised Haight's project precisely for the extent to which it succeeds in offering what she calls "the first fully developed postmodern Christology."[8] Toward clarifying what he himself intends by the increasingly-elusive label "postmodern," Haight offers four themes which characterize his understanding of the term. They are: a radical historical consciousness, a critical social consciousness, a pluralist consciousness, and a cosmic consciousness (330–34). It is important for readers to keep this specific, intended audience in mind even when Haight himself appears to forget how narrow a segment of contemporary society is addresssed by his apologetic christology, such as when he refers to this audience rather loosely as "the present-day world" (243). Both the intelligibility of the project and an evaluation of its success will depend on how it is received by those whom Haight has explicitly set out to address.[9]

Haight offers as the great paradigm for inculturation Christianity's transition from a primarily Jewish context to a Hellenistic one, in which the gospel message had to be re-interpreted in new language in order to effectively reach a new audience. Though Haight pays little attention to disparities between the Hellenization of a nascent religion and the postmodernization of a tradition carrying a two-thousand-year history, he does offer a compelling case for the need to re-imagine the presentation of the Christian gospel as it continues to encounter new cultural contexts. It is hard to overemphasize the impact this attention to audience has on Haight's christology as it unfolds in the book; by his own admission, the apologetic agenda is what drives his methodology. It also appears to dictate the emphases of his christology as, for example, his decision to pay such scant attention to Jesus' crucifixion. In what appears to be a justification for this radical departure from theological tradition, he bluntly explains that the vast majority of

Society of Jesus (1974–1975) in *Documents of the 31st and 32nd General Congregations* (St. Louis, Missouri: The Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1977), #5, 439–40.

[7]He refers to language used at the 1995 General Congregation of the Society of Jesus.

[8]Elizabeth Johnson, "Christology Re-visioned," *America* 181, no. 14 (November 6, 1999): 25–26.

[9]Lucretia B. Yaghjian, "Flannery O'Connor's Use of Symbol, Roger Haight's Christology, and the Religious Writer," *Theological Studies* 63 (2002): 268–301, places the postmodern christology of Haight in masterful conversation with the writings of Flannery O'Connor, noting that both writers are highly sensitive to reaching a largely secular audience who no longer accept many traditional Christian theological categories. Yaghjian cites O'Connor: "The great mistake that the unthinking Catholic reader usually makes is to think the Catholic writer is writing for him. . . . My audience are the people who think God is dead . . . at least these are the people I am conscious of writing for" (282).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0360966900004436 Published online by Cambridge University Press

theological language interpreting the suffering and death of Jesus "hardly communicates meaningfully to our age" (241). Since this historically central aspect of christology is deemed unintelligible to his target audience, Haight's re-interpretation of the tradition simply pushes it off to the side, where it is left largely untouched.

He suggests that Friedrich Schleiermacher and Karl Barth represent opposite poles with regard to the role apologetics may take in a theologian's work. In Schleiermacher we find a thoroughgoing apologetic theology (28).[10] Barth, on the other hand, believed that theology has no obligation whatever to align itself with prevailing cultural norms (28).[11] Though Haight sees dangers in the extremes of both positions, it is clear that he himself is more than a little sympathetic to Schleiermacher's project for its attention to audience and cultural context. For at least three reasons, Haight sees theology in general and christology in particular as inherently apologetic. First, he recalls that Christianity has been, from the beginning, a missionary religion which requires that the church must truly enter any given culture in order to effectively communicate with it. Second, Christians must be concerned with the inner logic and coherence of christology if they wish to avoid sheer fideism. Third, Christianity begins with a public, historical figure whose humanity offers a starting point of common ground with any audience. It is this third point which serves as Haight's chief rationale for his own christological methodology which he describes as "a genetic structure of understanding" (28).

This "genetic structure" is an attempt to retrace the ways in which christology actually developed through history, beginning with Jesus of Nazareth. For this reason, his point of departure is "from below," with special attention to historical Jesus research. As Haight explains: "Christology came into existence for the first time as a response to Jesus; it developed out of an encounter with God in and through Jesus during and after his lifetime. Since christology is about Jesus, there is nothing more simple than to realize that he remains its point of departure even today" (30).[12] And so, as "a first characterization of the method" of his work, Haight describes his genetic structure as "having

[10]Cf. Friedrich Schleiermacher, *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers,* trans. Richard Crouter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), first published anonymously in 1799. Significantly, the opening speech is titled "Apology."

[11]Haight cites Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. 1, pt. 1, *The Doctrine of the Word of God,* trans. G. T. Thomson and Harold Knight, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance, 2d ed. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1975), 3–44. Haight opens his own constructive christology (the final major unit of the book) with an analysis, by way of polar tensions, on the christological thought of Schleiermacher and Barth. See chap.11 ("Beyond Schleiermacher and Barth"), especially pp. 301–17.

[12]It would seem that this methodological orientation accounts for Haight's somewhat unconventional preference for not capitalizing the discipline "christology" throughout

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0360966900004436 Published online by Cambridge University Press

an apologetic dimension, being initiated from below and ascending, beginning with Jesus, and recognizing the impact of the new wave of Jesus research on the imagination of all Christians, theologians included" (40).

Fundamental to Haight's understanding of Jesus as symbol is his preference for the existential-historical Jesus over the empirical-historical Jesus (34).[13] For while he is optimistic that there is substantial empirical data we can hope to recover of the historical Jesus,[14] he appeals to Paul Ricoeur and Hans-Georg Gadamer in his insistence that data never exists in some pure, isolated state, but is always and everywhere appropriated through a process of interpretation. "To understand anything is to interpret it. . . . To be human is to interpret" (41). For this reason, he does not believe that the central aim of the historical Jesus project should be a quest to recreate figures and events as they existed in their own time. Instead, he believes the goal should be to transform our understanding of historical data through self-consciously placing it "in an explicit relationship with the questioner in the present" (35). Appealing to Gadamer (on "the fusion of horizons") and Ricoeur (on "appropriation"), Haight's hermeneutical orientation leads him naturally to a theory of critical correlation which he describes as "bringing together the present and the past, bringing into conjunction our present situation and the tradition about Jesus from a past that extends right up to the present" (45). The point is to enter into the past in such a way as to draw it forward in meaningful truth claims for life today, so that the interpretation of the past involves a fusion of horizons: "what is to be understood and its horizon are drawn into the horizon of the present in which those who would understand are located" (46).

In this way, Haight's several interests in inculturation, hermeneutics, and historical Jesus research converge to form a single foundation for the work of christology that follows. While Haight names "faithfulness to the Christian tradition" as first among his list of criteria for christology, it is quickly followed by another which sometimes overshadows the first: "intelligibility in today's world" (49).[15]

For Haight, faithfulness to the tradition always means an unswerv-

his work. To avoid undue confusion, I have opted to extend his preference throughout this essay, except when citing others who capitalize the term.

[13]The terms come from Schubert Ogden, *The Point of Christology* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1982), 41–63.

[14]See *Jesus*, 44: "One must answer today the long debated question of whether we can know enough about Jesus in order to make him the focus of christology in an explicit, methodological way. In this christology the response is that we can and we do, so that this knowledge that we have of Jesus is both necessary and sufficient for christology."

[15]For his criteria, see *Jesus*, 47–51. Further emphasizing his commitment to a method of critical correlation, he rounds out his three criteria with "empowerment of the Chris-

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0360966900004436 Published online by Cambridge University Press

ing commitment to an ongoing (re)interpretation of the tradition in such a way that it is meaningful and persuasive to the intended audience—in this case, to the "horizon" of educated, western, postmodern minds who are hermeneutically sophisticated and historically conscious. These foundational commitments consistently and radically inform Haight's theology of symbol in relation to christology as developed in *Jesus Symbol of God*.

III. Haight's Symbol Theory in Christological Context

Symbolic Language and Theology

This look into Haight's methodology leads to a more direct examination of his symbol theory in relation to theology. According to him, a "symbol is that through which something other than itself is known. A symbol mediates awareness of something else" (8). Following the lead of Paul Ricoeur, he further suggests that symbolic mediation is the only way some things can be known (8–9).[16] While the knowing that takes place through symbolism carries true epistemological weight, according to Haight, he is eager to distinguish symbolic meaning from empirically verifiable knowledge. Borrowing from Avery Dulles, Haight describes it as "engaged participatory knowledge" (9).[17] He contends that "every encounter with God should be understood as implying an experiential dimension." He objects to any view of revelation that "objectifies it in positive linguistic or propositional forms in such

tian life," which functions on several levels: it must have resonance with actual, existential Christian experience; it must respond to the ethical challenges of our time; and, it must offer a language of salvation that is intelligible to the actual Christian experience. This third criterion is, therefore, more an exclamation point to the second ("intelligibility in today's world") than a separate criterion itself. These three criteria are given even further treatment in the constructive segment of the book, where Haight outlines two christologies he sees as viable today (pp. 425–31).

[16]While Haight argues that symbols may at times function to reveal things which would not otherwise be known, Ricoeur presses even further when he contends that it is an inherent quality of symbols that they function as the sole means by which a certain surplus of (symbolic) meaning is accessed: "Symbolic signification, therefore, is so constituted that we can only attain the secondary signification by way of the primary signification, where this primary signification is the sole means of access to the surplus of meaning." In this regard, Ricoeur is more careful than Haight to limit what may and may not properly be called a symbol, an issue I take up later in this essay. See Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1976), 55. In a slightly narrower sense of the individual being making itself known both to itself and to others, Rahner has expressed a similar claim of symbolic expression when he writes: "The being is known in this symbol, without which it cannot be known at all; thus it is symbol in the original (transcendental) sense of the word" (Karl Rahner, "The Theology of the Symbol," in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 4: *More Recent Writings*, trans. Kevin Smyth [Baltimore: Helicon Press, 1966], 231).

[17]See Avery Dulles, "The Symbolic Structure of Revelation," *Theological Studies* 41 (1980): 60–61.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0360966900004436 Published online by Cambridge University Press

a way that it can be internalized notionally, conceptually, or linguistically without a living experience of its object or meaning" (193). The element of participation, or activity, is thus central to Haight's understanding of how religious symbols function. The knowledge gained through symbol is achieved only through an existential and experiential consciousness of that which is being mediated.

Given the fact that theological discourse reaches beyond the empirical, and that this knowledge is reached only by actively engaged participation, Haight concludes that "theology is a symbolic discipline" (9). This is consistent with his familiar, broader assertion that all religious language is symbolic. Two axioms follow from this conclusion. The first, posed negatively, is that theological assertions should not be understood as direct statements of objectified data about God. Instead, Haight proposes a kind of agnosticism in theological pursuits, suggesting that "theology communicates no immediate information about God" (9). He contends that symbolic knowledge is "deeply embedded in unknowing, in ignorance and agnosticism" (200–01). Stated another way: "It is always a mistake in categories to confuse a theological assertion with a datum of knowledge or a piece of information" (10). For this reason, Haight is emphatic in his warnings against what he calls the "hypostatization" of symbolic language about God (257).[18] The second axiom, posed positively, asserts that the symbolic claims of theology emerge only through the active, participatory experience of the faith community as it encounters the mystery of the transcendent. Due to the tensive and dynamic nature of all symbols, the tendency of theological symbolism is to "draw human consciousness and life into a deeper world of encounter with transcendent reality" (11). In this way, theology is again placed outside the realm of "hard physical science." While Haight may make too sharp a distinction between scientific knowledge and theological claims by way of over-objectifying the scientific method, his intention is clear enough: he sees theology as a dynamic, ever-evolving discipline, "an ongoing discussion open to all parties who bring symbolic answers to the most basic of human questions" (10).

Haight embraces Rahner's notion of "transcendental revelation" with the twofold affirmation of "the universal presence and personal self-communication of God to all human beings" which is of such a

[18]In this context, Haight highlights problems he sees in the hypostatization of the terms Logos, Wisdom, and even Spirit. According to him, each of these terms should be understood as poetic figures of speech in reference to various attributes of God. He contends that difficulties arise when any of these personifications is transformed into a real being, into "a literal something," distinct from the Father, and yet divine. It appears that herein lie the roots of Haight's unwillingness to accept the traditional notion of a pre-existent Logos, a position roundly rejected in the CDF's "Notification."

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0360966900004436 Published online by Cambridge University Press

nature that it "can only enter explicitly, reflectively, and thematically as an object into human consciousness by virtue of an historical mediation" (12). By way of analogy, Haight transposes this notion from individuals to the corporate context of religious groups. Here he demonstrates an affinity for John Hick's argument on the legitimacy of religious pluralism, which contends that the recognition of the Real ("ultimate transcendent reality") will "always take on the form and character dictated by the situation and circumstances of the culture of the people involved" (13).[19] Haight contends that wherever God's presence is experienced by a group, that awareness will necessarily assume "the form and character that is marked by the specific situation, language, culture, and symbols that mediate it to consciousness," so that the "symbols of a specific culture provide the form of a particular religious consciousness" (13). He then distinguishes between two categories of symbols: conceptual (or conscious) symbols, and concrete symbols. Conceptual symbols include "words, notions, concepts, ideas, sayings, or texts" which mediate a meaning beyond what they overtly signify. Concrete symbols, on the other hand, offer access to another reality by way of "things, places, events, or persons" (13). With these premises in hand, he reaches his central claim that "for Christians, Jesus is the concrete symbol of God" (14; cf. 198).

Symbolic Language and Christology

Having laid the foundation for his hermeneutically-oriented methodology, as well as the groundwork for his case that, for Christians, Jesus is the central concrete symbol of God, Haight offers this definition for the christological enterprise: "Christology is the interpretation of Jesus Christ as the medium of God's self-communication to human existence" (196). As already discussed, Haight believes that the mediation of religious meaning is always symbolic: "A religious medium is a symbol" (196). It follows that when Haight speaks of Jesus as symbol of God, he has in mind primarily that "Jesus is the mediation of God's presence to Christianity" (14). But when making reference to religious symbols, Haight is quick to note that he is *not* employing the term in the low manner of those who speak of something being "merely a symbol."

[19]See John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 162–65, 233–51. Haight adds that Karl Rahner agrees, in principle, with Hick on this point; see Rahner's "History of the World and Salvation History," *Theological Investigations*, vol. 5: *Later Writings,* trans. Karl-H. Kruger (Baltimore: Helicon Press, 1966), 97–114. In this context, Rahner is exploring the relationship between "salvation-history" and "profane history," and writes that "Salvation-history, which of its nature is a hidden history, works itself out in the dimension of profane history in which it takes place. God, who grants salvation, addresses man within the profane dimension of history" (99).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0360966900004436 Published online by Cambridge University Press

He is particularly emphatic on this point with regard to his understanding of Jesus as symbol of God (xiii).[20] More specifically, this high estimation of symbol seems to mean at least two things. The first is that this mediation is a two-way street; Jesus as symbol both mediates God's presence to humanity and draws human consciousness toward God (xiii). Second, Jesus the symbol does not merely point to God by way of a socially-accepted convention, such as a red light calling traffic to a halt at an intersection. With regard to this second point, Haight is clear to distinguish between symbol and sign, where a sign is referential but is not mediational. A sign has no intrinsic relationship with its referent, relying wholly on social convention for its referential significance. A symbol, by contrast, does not simply point to something other than itself, but actually mediates that other so that it truly "makes present what it symbolizes" (197).

As noted earlier, Haight believes that symbols, at times, mediate that which would not—indeed, could not—be mediated by any other means. He suggests that this is particularly the case with religious language given the transcendent nature of the object of religion. Since God is transcendent, it follows that we can not have direct access to God. But symbolic language offers the possibility of accessing, by way of mediation, what would otherwise be thoroughly inaccessible to us. Through both concrete symbols (especially Jesus of Nazareth) and conceptual symbols (e.g., the gospel narratives and other biblical texts), transcendent Reality is mediated experientially to the Christian community. Religious symbols thus participate in, yet are distinct from, the transcendent reality they mediate to humanity. "On the one hand, the medium participates in transcendence, in God, so that God is present to and within the medium. Yet, on the other hand, the medium is not the transcendent itself, because it is a finite piece of the world, and thus must point beyond itself to God" (196). Jesus is no exception to this theory. As Christianity's central, concrete symbol of God, Jesus makes God present to the Christian community by participating in God though he himself is distinct from God.

The intrinsically dialectical structure of symbol as discussed in Haight's broader symbol theory thus manifests itself in his christology through the distinction maintained between Jesus of Nazareth and Jesus called Christ. In fact, Haight lists the symbol's ability to maintain an inherent dialectic as among the chief merits of holding a symbolic

[20]Later Haight writes: "It needs to be repeated that the phrase 'merely a symbol' has no connection at all with the theory of symbol being employed here." He continues, "For 'merely a symbol' has come to mean that something 'refers to something else' and 'does not mean what it says literally,' and, therefore, 'is not really true.' If something is 'merely' a symbol, therefore, it is no symbol at all, for a symbol as it is understood here truly reveals and makes present what it symbolizes" (197).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0360966900004436 Published online by Cambridge University Press

understanding of christology. In keeping with his earlier claim that all symbolically-mediated knowing is experientially gained as "engaged participatory knowledge," Haight grounds this tension in the experience of Jesus' first followers who encountered the transcendent God in a very concrete way through the man Jesus. In this way, we can rightly say that Jesus both is, and is not, the proper object of christology. He *is* its object to the extent that he is the central symbol of God to Christians, and so serves as the "source and ground of christology." He *is not* its object to the extent that his intention was never to draw attention merely to himself, but always beyond himself to God and God's rule (204-05). This distinction lies behind the criticism intended in Haight's rather odd critique that "there is a tendency in christology to become christocentric." This dialectic also gives rise to the striking suggestion that, "Jesus apart from his symbolizing God generates no special religious interest. Only Jesus the symbol of God is the subject matter of christology." He claims that this symbolic dialectic has a dogmatic correlate in the Council of Chalcedon's doctrine of the two natures, a doctrine which attempts to preserve precisely this tension between the finite and the infinite in Jesus (204-05).

IV. What Sort of Jesus is *this "Symbol of God"?*

According to his critics, the priority Haight gives to interpreting the Christian tradition in such a way that it is intelligible to his postmodern audience often strains at the integrity of his claim to traditional fidelity.[21] Nowhere is this more apparent than in his understanding of the doctrine of the divinity of Jesus Christ.[22] And given his conviction that the interpretation of history is never the direct, unmitigated retrieval of persons and events of the past, but rather is always an act of critical correlation, Jesus is subjected to a fairly thorough reinterpretation in Haight's project to preserve the intelligibility of Jesus' life and message in a postmodern age. Within the rubric of this methodology, all previous doctrinal claims regarding Jesus—whether formulated in councils, in the writings of theologians, or in Scripture

[21]Not surprisingly, it is precisely on this point of theological method that the CDF's "Notification" anchors its strong criticism of the book. Headlining the list of "serious doctrinal errors" is the opinion that Haight's effort at "critical correlation" actually results in "a subordination of the content of faith to its plausibility and intelligibility in postmodern culture" (sec. I, par. 2).

[22]Recall Haight's definition: "Christology is the interpretation of Jesus Christ as the medium of God's self-communication to human existence" (196). With this definition of christology in hand, it is a small step to take when Haight proposes the following as a criterion for evaluating christologies: "christology is faithfully Christian in the measure in which it adequately explains how Jesus is the concrete symbol mediating God's salvation to humankind" (212).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0360966900004436 Published online by Cambridge University Press

itself—are likewise treated not as privileged moments of unmediated revelation, but as human interpretations of Jesus the symbol, constructed within specific cultural contexts, with little (or no) distinction beyond chronological priority over the claims of constructive theology being done today. Naturally, this offers some room for play even within the parameters of a christology claiming faithfulness to the tradition. In Haight's own attempt at a constructive christology in the final segment of his book, this re-presentation of Jesus of Nazareth has some far-reaching consequences for traditional Church teachings on Jesus' divinity and, in turn, on the nature and meaning of the Trinity.

As already discussed, Jesus as symbol of God in Haight's symbol theory means that Jesus participates in, but is distinct from, God. The symbol mediates, but is other than, that to which it points. In keeping with his aggressive commitment to an apologetic christology from below rooted deeply in historical Jesus research, Haight rejects a traditional three-stage descent-christology where God as pre-existent Logos assumes a human nature.[23] Such a model, according to Haight, necessarily entails God being present to Jesus in a manner qualitatively different from God's union with the rest of humanity. As this claim jeopardizes the true humanity of Jesus, Haight looks instead toward the development of a Spirit christology, which favors the humanity over the divinity of Jesus.[24] Haight thus rejects the notion of Jesus' pre-existence as "contradictory to his consubstantiality with us" (459).[25] Nevertheless, he wants to defend in some measure the uniqueness of Jesus. And so, in the end, he offers this statement: "In short, one may understand that God as Spirit was present to Jesus in a superlative degree, and this is sufficient to convey all that was intended by a qualitative difference" (464).[26]

Haight's re-interpretation of traditional christological doctrines

[23]This is one point where Haight critiques Rahner's christological language. See Haight, *Jesus,* 432–33, 443, 459. See also Haight's reflections on the "Son of God" christology found in Mark's gospel which Haight categorizes as a "two-stage christology" insofar as it lacks any mention of pre-existence in its understanding of Jesus as Son of God (159–63).

[24]While Haight explicitly prefers a Spirit christology model over a Logos christology (a preference evident as early as p.23), he nonetheless argues that it is possible to develop a Logos christology which does meet his criterion for intelligibility to a postmodern audience. He even presents a model Logos christology alongside a Spirit christology in chapter 15, contending that both are legitimate christological options. While he manages to preserve enough Logos christology language to assign it the title, the substance is so thoroughly similar to the Spirit christology which follows that one is left wondering whether Haight has not, in fact, succeeded only in dressing a single Spirit christology in two rhetorical robes. For an earlier presentation of his defense of a Spirit christology, see Roger Haight, "The Case for Spirit Christology," *Theological Studies* 53 (1992): 257–87.

[25]Haight qualifies his dismissal of Jesus' pre-existence by adding, "unless the understanding is such that we too were pre-existent."

[26]Though Haight rejects the notion of any qualitative difference between Jesus and

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0360966900004436 Published online by Cambridge University Press

leads logically, even necessarily, to a significant reformulation of the traditional doctrine of the immanent Trinity.[27] Applying a "genetic structure of understanding" to trinitarian theology in a manner consistent with his analysis of christology described above, Haight observes that the doctrine of the trinity developed only in the course of the christological debates, so that "trinitarian theology is completely dependent upon christology" (471). He contends, therefore, that any analysis of trinitarian doctrine ought to respect the processes of historical development.[28] Once the claim of Jesus' pre-existence is no longer a viable part of Haight's model, the immanent Trinity is naturally called into question. His use of the lower case "t" for "trinity" reflects Haight's dogmatic demotion of the doctrine, and he insists that "one finds no doctrine of an immanent trinity in the New Testament, that is, a doctrine depicting the inner reality of God as differentiated" (474).[29] He attempts to demonstrate that the doctrine emerged later during the Patristic era due to (sometimes unfortunate) developments in the theological tradition. The most important of these developments was the hypostatization of Logos language, whereby mere personification of God's actions using symbolic language were hypostatized (or reified) over time, affording ontological weight to a symbol never intended to reflect concrete reality. He continues: "Once Logos is hypostatized, one has the problem of the second God" (476). Modalism and subordinationism were two attempts to resolve this problem, but it was at Nicaea that a threshold was crossed when the Father and Son were said to be one in a common substance. At that point, writes Haight, "the explicit or full doctrine of the trinity was then a matter of time" (476). Haight's own solution to the problem comes by way of proposing the possibility both of an "orthodox conception of modalism" and a more

ourselves, he admits feeling compelled to preserve something of it due to its prevalence throughout the Christian tradition. He therefore notes the ambiguity of the term "qualitative" in relation to "quantitative" differences, suggesting that a quantitative difference does, in fact, empirically alter the qualitative character of a given subject (463–64).

[27]In a move reminiscent of Schleiermacher's decision to relegate his entire discussion of the doctrine of the Trinity to the brief conclusion of his monumental dogmatic work *The Christian Faith*, Haight leaves his own treatment of the Trinity in his 500-page christological work to a brief final chapter. See Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, ed. H.R. Mackintosh and J. S. Stewart, 2nd ed. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1989) for an English translation of the second German edition published in 1830–31.

[28]See *Jesus*, 479–80 for further analysis of the relationship between trinitarian theology and christology.

[29]For an incisive critical commentary on Haight's trinitarian thought in *Jesus Symbol of God*, see the sections entitled "Theology From Below and Trinitarian Agnosticism" and "Fault Lines" in William P. Loewe's "Two Revisionist Christologies of Presence: Roger Haight and Piet Schoonenberg," in *A Sacramental Life: A Festschrift Honoring Bernard Cooke*, eds. Michael Horace Barnes and William P. Roberts (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2003), 93–115.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0360966900004436 Published online by Cambridge University Press

or less "orthodox subordinationism" in our historically conscious thought-world (477–79).

Three Points of Critique

As I noted in the introduction, Haight demonstrates a remarkable commitment to his multiple guiding principles, and achieves considerable success in fulfilling his apologetic agenda. There remain, however, fundamental problems specific to the development of his symbol theory which deserve serious attention toward an even more persuasive christological model. Considerations of three of these problems will occupy the remainder of this essay.

To begin, there is the problem of internal coherence with regard to how the term "symbol" is variously employed throughout the work. Second, beyond the issue of internal consistency, I suggest that Haight's symbol theory ultimately proves incapable of supporting his own claims to preserve the uniqueness of Jesus within a christological framework faithful to the Christian tradition. Finally, I contend that the supremacy Haight affords the criterion of "intelligibility" in his schema strips symbols (particularly religious symbols) of their ability to negatively critique a given historical-cultural context, potentially compromising the ability of religious symbols to function prophetically as agents of change in the face of systemic injustices.

After briefly addressing the first of these problems, the second and third issues will be considered in relation to the symbol theories of two thinkers to whom Haight himself is deeply indebted: Karl Rahner and Paul Ricoeur. Haight is explicit about his reliance on Rahner throughout the book, but nowhere is this more true than in the presentation of his own constructive christology.[30] Ricoeur's work, too, is foundational to Haight's project, with respect to interpretation theory generally and to symbol theory more particularly. Viewed together, the symbol theories of these two thinkers lay the groundwork for viable solutions to certain difficulties found in Haight's own symbol theory in relation to Jesus. Specifically, they point a way toward a theology of symbol which is high enough to maintain not only a christology faithful to the tradition, but a gospel capable of prophetic power even while maintaining post-modern intelligibility.

V. Haight's Symbol: A Term Stretched Too Thin

No one can accuse Haight of spending too little time developing his theory of symbol. Laying a theoretical and methodological founda-

[30]See especially chapter 15 ("The Divinity of Jesus Christ"). Here Haight, while sympathetically suggesting some points of critique which have recently been raised against Rahner's christology (432–35), describes his own constructive work in this chapter as "a retrieval of Rahner" (435).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0360966900004436 Published online by Cambridge University Press

tion for his constructive christology occupies fully four chapters of the text (chaps. 1, 2, 7, and 11), in addition to the considerable attention it receives within other chapters less explicitly devoted to methodology. Perhaps the problem is that Haight spends *too* much time developing his theory. There are times when his own understanding of symbol (both its nature and function) becomes unwieldy to the point of encompassing nearly everything. Such an expansive notion serves to contradict his claim to be presenting a high theory of symbol, one which eschews the phrase "'merely' a symbol." (xiii).[31]

To begin, there is the sheer diversity of ways Haight uses the word "symbol." Not only are "symbol" and "symbolic" used frequently, but in a wide range of senses quite inconsistent with Haight's usual terminological fastidiousness. The first occurrence can be found in the Preface, where he refers to the term "postmodernity" as the "generalized symbol" for the cultural factors shaping the audience to whom his work is directed (xii). But "postmodernity" surely represents exactly what he claims the symbol Jesus is *not*, namely an arbitrary sign, the meaning of which is determined by social convention. From there, application of the term comes fast and furious. The human body is called a symbol, the "kingdom of God" in Jesus' parables is a symbol (78), revelation itself is called a symbol (344), and Chalcedon is referred to as "a classic symbol of Christian faith" (244). At one point, Haight even suggests that metaphors are symbols (13).[32] How are we to unravel the tangle of meanings implied in even this selective list of symbols?

Beyond the dizzying variety of ways the term is applied generally, there arises the more specific issue of uneven application of so-called symbols of God. In addition to Jesus as symbol of God, consider even this brief survey of how the term symbol is used in reference to "the Spirit," "Logos," and "Word of God." After repeatedly defining a symbol—and specifically the religious symbol—as that which mediates something other than itself, as that which makes present something other than itself, Haight nevertheless proceeds to refer to the Spirit of God as a symbol even while declaring there is no distinction to be made between Spirit and God: "The biblical symbol, the Spirit of God, refers to God. God as Spirit, or the Spirit of God, is simply God, is not other than God, but is materially and numerically identical with God. God as Spirit is God" (447). This is precisely the lack of distinction between

[31]John Cavadini levels a similar charge against Haight in his sharply critical review "A Metaphor Gone Wild," *Commonweal,* 8 October 1999, 22–24.

[32]Another example of his interchangeable use of the terms comes in a discussion of "the metaphorical and symbolic character of this term 'Word' . . ." (437). This apparent collapse of metaphor and symbol into a single meaning is particularly inconsistent with the interpretation theory upon which Haight relies most heavily, namely Paul Ricoeur's as outlined in Ricoeur's *Interpretation Theory*, 45–69.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0360966900004436 Published online by Cambridge University Press

symbol and symbolized that he is so painfully careful to avoid in the development of Jesus as symbol of God. "Logos" and "Word of God" are also referred to as symbols of God, are at times used interchangeably, and like Spirit are used *not* to designate that which mediates something other than itself, but as direct references to God. He writes: "The biblical symbol, the Word of God, ultimately refers to God," and, "Logos or Word is the symbolic self-expression of the Father within the Godhead" (436, 438). How are we to interpret these inconsistencies? It may be that Haight is simply mixing colloquial and technical uses of the term without fair warning. Whatever the cause may be, this confusion, though distracting, hardly poses a substantial threat to his larger theological agenda. More serious problems lie elsewhere, and it is to these that I now turn.

VI. Haight's Symbolic Theology vs. Rahner's Theology of Symbol

Setting aside inconsistencies in Haight's application of the term "symbol," I intend now to consider how his theory of symbol directly affects his own christological project as presented in the book. He lists as the first criterion of any adequate christology "faithfulness to the Christian tradition" (47–49). In the end, does his symbol theory prove high enough to support this claim? Despite coming admirably close, it seems to me that in certain ways it fails to do so.[33]

A solution to Haight's dilemma may lie in Karl Rahner's theory of symbol, as it suggests one way Haight might sufficiently elevate his own notion of symbol without alienating his audience. Haight's references to Rahner with regard to symbol theory are overwhelmingly favorable, suggesting that considerable continuity exists between the two theories. At one point, Haight expresses a desire "to preserve the formal structure of Rahner's theology of symbol as it is applied to Jesus Christ . . . " (439). Only later when Haight is constructing his postmodern recasting of Logos christology does he highlight points of significant contrast with Rahner's thought, even while eagerly calling his own

[33]Among Haight's critics, Cavadini ("A Metaphor Gone Wild") is one who concludes that Haight's project fails to back up his own protestations that Jesus is not merely a symbol after all. Cavadini is certainly not alone in his assessment. For an equally sharp but more sustained critique of Haight's earlier presentation of the nature of Jesus (one consistent with that developed in *Jesus Symbol of God*), see John H. Wright, S.J., "Note: Roger Haight's Spirit Christology," *Theological Studies* 53 (1992): 729–35. In the end, Wright believes Haight's christology is too low to fulfill even the guidelines Haight establishes for himself: "These criteria are well chosen. But using them to evaluate his Christology as described above, I find it to be defective, precisely in his denial that the ultimate personal subject in Jesus, the one who is Jesus, is truly and personally divine" (730).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0360966900004436 Published online by Cambridge University Press

project "a retrieval of Rahner" (435).[34] A closer look at Rahner's symbol theory, however, suggests significant incompatibilities with Haight's understanding of religious symbols. These points of disagreement naturally lead to the crucial discrepancies which arise when comparing their respective christologies.

To be sure, on first appearances, Rahner's notion of symbol looks much like the one offered by Haight. For Rahner, symbols are distinct from "arbitrary signs," contain a meaning beyond what they overtly signify, and function in such a way that they allow the other which they symbolize "to be there."[35] And Rahner, like Haight, makes no secret about his own estimate of the importance of symbol theory in the theologian's work. He declares that "it is only to be expected that no theology can be complete without also being a theology of the symbol," adding that "in fact the whole of theology is incomprehensible if it is not essentially a theology of symbols."[36] But beneath these similarities, the two theories of symbol part company as they are derived from vastly disparate starting points. Robert Masson has suggested that the differences are serious enough that they fundamentally challenge Haight's appeal to Rahner in the first place.[37] Whether Haight's appeals are as disingenuous as Masson implies, differences in the two thinkers' points of symbolic departure clearly deserve more attention than Haight explicitly offers. Whereas Haight's symbol theory is rooted in hermeneutics and interpretation theory, Rahner's theory of symbolism is rooted squarely in a theological anthropology in which humanity "bears the stigma of the infinite" in our very being. By this stigma, Rahner means that "all beings (each of them, in fact) are multiple" and that "being is plural in itself" even within its inherent unity.[38] From where does this plurality in unity arise? It is not merely a consequence of our finitude, but rather is rooted in "that divine plurality which does not imply imperfection and weakness and limitation of being, but the supreme fullness of unity and concentrated force," leading him to assert: "A consideration of the Trinity shows that the 'one' of unity and plurality, thus understood, is an ontological ultimate."[39] It is this dynamic of plural unity which causes Rahner to declare that "all beings are by their nature symbolic," for it is only through expression that a being comes to know itself in its own intrinsic otherness which is constitutive of its being. Rahner understands this self-expression by

[34]Haight notes "five problematic areas" of Rahner's christological thought (432–35).
[35]Rahner, "Symbol," 225.
[36]Ibid., 235.
[37]Robert Masson, "The Clash of Christological Symbols: A Case for Metaphoric Realism," in *Christology: Memory, Inquiry, Practice*, 69.
[38]Rahner, "Symbol," 225, 227.
[39]Ibid., 227.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0360966900004436 Published online by Cambridge University Press

which plurality is constituted to be a *symbolic* act. Therefore, we both know ourselves and make ourselves known to others symbolically: "The being is known in this symbol, without which it cannot be known at all: thus it is symbol in the original (transcendental) sense of the word."[40]

In this way, the very foundation of Rahner's theology of symbol assumes, *a priori*, the doctrine of the immanent Trinity. Rahner himself does not shrink from the fact that he is offering a theological anthropology from above; he explicitly declares that he is doing "theological ontology, which need not be afraid of adducing revealed data."[41] In fact, it seems he anticipates the very objections Haight repeatedly raises against theological arguments "from above," arguments which Haight insists are unintelligible to contemporary sensibilities. In a particularly pointed note justifying his methodology, Rahner makes this assertion:

> These considerations are not open to the objection that, if correct, they could deduce the Trinity from purely rational philosophical considerations. For their starting-point (which is not capable of proof by purely philosophical arguments) is that there is a plurality even in the supreme Being, without detriment to his unity. Hence our considerations presuppose the Trinity. They do not prove it, but use the knowledge of it given in revelation as the starting-point of ontological theological considerations. This is a perfectly legitimate method.[42]

Haight disagrees.[43] It is ironic that despite Haight's well-noted reliance on Rahner for the presentation of his own symbol theory, Rahner bases his theory precisely on the grounds which Haight's own theory is, in the end, forced logically to reject—namely, the doctrine of the immanent Trinity.

Given the foundational status which both thinkers give to symbol theory in their theological work, such incompatible points of departure naturally lead to substantial disparities in their resulting christologies. This is all the more significant given the central position which christology assumes in relationship to symbol theory in each theologian's

[40]Ibid., 231.
[41]Ibid., 226.
[42]Ibid., 229–30, n. 9.
[43]Haight criticizes Rahner's trinitarian theology specifically on this point: "The problem with Rahner's construct is that, from a critical epistemological point of view, the axiom of the identity of the economic and the immanent trinity represents a jump. Epistemologically, it is a pure postulate that rests on no more than dogmatic grounds" (487). Haight takes particular issue here with Rahner's axiom: "The 'economic' Trinity is the 'immanent' Trinity and the 'immanent' Trinity is the 'economic' Trinity." Cf. Karl Rahner, *The Trinity*, trans. Joseph Donceel (New York: Seabury, 1974), 21–24.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0360966900004436 Published online by Cambridge University Press

theological program.[44] While Rahner's proposition that "the theology of the Logos is strictly a theology of the symbol"[45] certainly resonates with Haight's own rhetoric on the Logos, the symbology underlying Rahner's claim appears to be far more capable of supporting the traditional claims of Jesus' uniqueness and divinity than is Haight's understanding of symbol. Having established his transcendental theory of symbol in the plural nature of being itself as found in the Trinity, Rahner's symbol does more than "make present" (Haight) the other by way of mediation; the symbol is, rather, the "self-realization of the thing symbolized in itself," a self-realization which is "constitutive of its presence."[46] As Masson has helpfully pointed out, Haight and Rahner both acknowledge the dialectic nature of symbol, insofar as the symbol both "is" and "is not" the thing symbolized. In the case of Jesus as symbol of God, however, a break appears in their thought, for where Rahner is more careful to maintain the "is," Haight's passionate defense of Jesus' full humanity inevitably lends primacy to the "is not."[47]

In other words, it seems Haight's symbol theory, while succeeding at postmodern intelligibility, falls short in supporting his own claims pertaining to both the uniqueness of Jesus and faithfulness to tradition. On the other hand, Rahner's symbol theory, while failing to speak convincingly to a postmodern audience suspicious of such *a priori* claims, appears quite capable of supporting a high christology well within the Christian tradition. Is there material in this comparative analysis which offers a middle way—a model upholding an adequately high symbol theory while retaining intelligibility to Haight's intended audience?

To presume that Haight should simply accept Rahner's theology of symbol is not only unfair but nonsensical for a number of reasons, not least of which is Haight's extensive development of a theological method which renders Rahner's presuppositions unacceptable. Haight himself has been explicit in rejecting the Trinity-as-basis in Rahner's theology of symbol insofar as it moves "from the unknown to known," rather than the other way around.[48] At the same time, it seems to me that Haight's own symbol theory would be strengthened by embracing

[44]Rahner writes: "If a theology of symbolic realities is to be written, Christology, the doctrine of the incarnation of the Word, will obviously form the central chapter" ("Symbol," 237).

[45]Ibid., 235.

[46]Ibid., 234.

[47]Masson, "Clash," 66. In this regard, Masson shows how Haight is clearly more sympathetic to Paul Tillich's notion of symbol than he is to Rahner's. The discrepancy also highlights for Masson the illegitimacy of Haight's conflation of the two thinkers' theologies of symbol in the book (cf. "Clash," 65–69).

[48]Roger Haight, "Response to Robert Masson: The Clash of Christological Symbols," in *Christology: Memory, Inquiry, Practice*, 88.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0360966900004436 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Rahner's notion of the plurality of being, though without grounding that claim in trinitarian doctrine. Without attempting a full elaboration here, I nonetheless suggest that a transcendental understanding of the plurality of being itself would serve as a plausible starting point for Haight's symbol theory without presuming the doctrine of the immanent Trinity. For if the plurality of being is, in fact, an ontological reality as Rahner claims it is, appealing to the triune nature of the Godhead to substantiate that claim—however unproblematic for Rahner—need not be the necessary starting point of the argument. That being is plural, that self-expression is thus a requisite component of substantiating one's own nature and therefore knowing oneself, and finally that beings are in turn inherently symbolic—each of these claims is wholly defensible without ever resorting to *a priori* theological appeals. Rahner himself was confident enough in the fundamentally symbolic nature of being (that is, "[a] being comes to itself by way of 'expression'"[49]) to assert: "This is the only starting-point from which one can arrive at a correct theory of symbol in general, where the symbol is the reality in which *another* attains knowledge of a being."[50]

It seems to me that Rahner's understanding of symbol turns out to be a more adequate theory for advancing Haight's christological project than the one Haight himself proposes. Could Rahner's high(er) theology of symbol, rooted in the plurality of being, find a home in Haight's postmodern, apologetic christology without violating Haight's own rigorous methodology? I believe it could. In addition to the possibility of divorcing Rahner's theology of symbol from the immanent Trinity to circumvent the *a priori* assumptions of Rahner's understanding of symbol, we might also note that Haight's work is hardly without precedent in employing transcendental notions to advance his theological agenda. For example, Haight appropriates Rahner's transcendental understanding of revelation early in his book as a foundational premise to his own argument that God's self-communication never exists as such, but is always mediated by way of this-worldly, historical experience (12-13). Rahner's understanding of symbol would be a logical and wholly consistent antecedent to that claim.

In the end, however, it may be that Haight is simply trying to hold too many claims at once: specifically, a high christology which is wholly faithful to the ancient Christian tradition in the one hand, and uncompromising intelligibility within a postmodern context in the other. If this is the case, a solution may rest most naturally in lightening the load. I turn now to making a case that Haight should do just that in

[49]Rahner, "Symbol," 230.
[50]Ibid., 230. Italics are his.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0360966900004436 Published online by Cambridge University Press

a brief examination of a third problem for Haight—his unyielding insistence on postmodern intelligibility.

VII. Haight's Symbolic Intelligibility vs. Ricoeur's Symbolic Opacity

In the development of his own methodological framework, Haight borrows generously from the thought of Paul Ricoeur. And, to be sure, there is considerable overlap in their thinking not only with respect to symbol theory, but in the area of hermeneutics and interpretation theory generally. When describing the hermeneutical dynamic of Jesus research whereby the historical Jesus is drawn forward and understood in a present-day horizon, Haight appeals to Ricoeur's notion of "appropriation" (46, 75).[51] When explaining his own hermeneutical approach to ancient texts (specifically the gospel narratives), Haight again looks to Ricoeur when he borrows the term "distanciation," whereby Ricoeur describes how the meaning of a text transcends its original sociohistorical context precisely through its ability to be accessed by a later audience in abstracted, written form (42).[52] Extending this notion of distanciation, Haight also borrows from Ricoeur the expression "surplus of meaning," whereby "a text acquires new meanings in new situations, meanings which are also intrinsic to the original" (35).[53] When Haight acknowledges those whose thought has significantly shaped the development of his own symbol theory, Ricoeur's name naturally appears in that group (202).[54]

Perhaps even more importantly, both writers express a deep desire to recover the relevance of traditional religious language in a postcritical, historically-conscious age which can no longer embrace the ancient creeds and doctrines with the kind of uncritical acceptance so common in previous generations. While Ricoeur is unsentimental in recounting the loss of this first naïveté, he is deeply optimistic in expressing his conviction that a second naïveté in our contemporary western society is both possible and necessary.[55] And, like Haight,

[51]Haight uses "horizon" here in the Gadamerian sense of the word. See Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall, 2d rev. ed. (New York: Continuum, 1998), 302–07.

[52]See Ricoeur on the difference between the spoken and written word: "The letters of Paul are no less addressed to me than to the Romans, the Galatians, the Corinthians, and the Ephesians. Only the dialogue has a 'thou' whose identification precedes discourse. The meaning of a text is open to anyone who can read" (*Interpretation Theory*, 93).

[53]It should be noted, however, that Ricoeur himself uses the phrase "surplus of meaning" (or "surplus of signification") to refer to a second level of meaning to be found in symbolic signification, what he calls "the residue of the literal interpretation" (*Interpretation Theory*, 55).

[54]Rahner, Tillich, and Eliade round out the short list.

[55]Ricoeur affirms: "I believe that being can still speak to me—no longer, of course,

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0360966900004436 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Ricoeur is fully convinced that the achievement of this living faith in traditional religious symbols is principally a hermeneutical task. "For the second immediacy that we seek and the second naïveté that we await are no longer accessible to us anywhere else than in hermeneutics," writes Ricoeur, who adds, "we can believe only by interpreting."[56]

Just as importantly, both demonstrate profound hope in the transformative power of symbolic religious language. That is, they share a belief in the possibilities of religious language to affect personal and social change in contemporary society. In this regard, Haight names "empowerment" as one of three criteria for evaluating christologies, a criterion which includes a commitment to meeting "the ethical challenges of our time" (50-51). The importance he places on this ethical imperative is evidenced in his explicit preference for what he terms "liberation theologies," by which he means not only Latin American liberation theology, but also black theology and feminist theology (363–94).[57] He also makes a special effort to highlight the ways Jesus himself preached a message of social critique, calling Jesus "savior or liberator" in the social-political sense, adding that "Jesus' God was a subversive God" (74-78). God's love "confronts people prophetically" as it did through Jesus' parables, where "the poor, the marginated, the dehumanized" are offered hope and encouragement in their situation (81-82). Ricoeur similarly expresses hope for what he calls "new modes of being" in the world, new possibilities which may be opened precisely through a hermeneutical appropriation of religious symbolism.[58]

The extensive attention paid by Haight to the prophetic, ethical power of the gospel narratives brings us face to face with what appears to be a critical dilemma for his larger christological project, one that may be resolved for him through a further appropriation of Ricoeur's theory of symbol. At times it seems that Haight's commitment to an uncompromising apologetic may effectively derail his expressed intentions for a socially-subversive gospel; his inculturative, apologetic success may come at too great a cost. He is willing to re-interpret not only

under the form of immediate belief, but as a second immediacy aimed at by hermeneutics. This second naïveté aims to be the postcritical equivalent of precritical hierophany" (Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, trans. Emerson Buchanan [Boston: Beacon Press, 1967], 352).

[56]Ibid., 352. Ricoeur continues by describing such a hermeneutics as "the 'modern' mode of belief in symbols, an expression of the distress of modernity and a remedy for that distress."

[57]In this chapter, Haight laments the fact that the Christian message today has too often become an exclusively individual affair seen as having little relevance to pressing social concerns. He thus argues for a more socially and ethically relevant role for religion in our postmodern world.

[58]Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory,* 94; also *Symbolism of Evil,* 356.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0360966900004436 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the language but the very content of the tradition in order to align it with postmodern sensibilities in a way that denies the symbol, including the symbol of Jesus, the power to act in any meaningful way as a prophetic agent of change—a purpose of christology that he himself is most eager to retrieve.

The near-disappearance of the crucifixion of Jesus in Haight's work serves as a telling case in point. Besides the obvious reason that the crucifixion has always served as an integral event in the Jesus narrative beginning with the biblical gospels, Haight's decision to make barely more than passing mention of the cross is striking given the additional reason that Jesus' suffering and death has played so important a role in many of the very liberation theologies he so eagerly recommends, especially those in Latin and South America. The suffering Christ, the righteous victim, Jesus the persecuted revolutionary, Jesus the martyr for justice, as well as the example of Jesus' non-violence in the face of violent political oppression—these images, and many more associated with Jesus' Passion, have served as powerful sources of inspiration for Christians seeking pragmatic and ethical guidelines for justice when confronted with social and political inequities.[59] Why, then, does Haight so thoroughly avoid the crucifixion of Jesus?

While we search in vain for a clear *theological* explanation, Haight makes no secret of his conviction that the crucifixion disqualifies itself for failing his litmus test of "postmodern intelligibility."

> The language of Jesus suffering for us, of being a sacrifice to God, of absorbing punishment for sin in our place, of being required to die to render satisfaction to God, hardly communicates meaningfully to our age. These concepts do not intersect at all with present consciousness. More seriously, the images associated with this talk offend and even repulse postmodern sensibility and thereby form a barrier to a salutary appreciation of Jesus Christ (241).

Haight appears to be content with that explanation, proceeding as if that portion of the symbolic narrative of Jesus' life simply never hap-

[59]See, for example, James M. Cone, *Speaking the Truth: Ecumenism, Liberation, and Black Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1999), 100 (on the role of Jesus' crucifixion in the theology of Martin Luther King, Jr). Cone later writes: "Because the church is a community called into being by the 'Crucified God,' it must be a crucified church, living under the cross" (124). See also the discussion of martyrdom in the introduction to Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*, trans. and ed. Caridad Inda and John Eagleson (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1988), xliii–xliv (orig. 1971). Also see Phillip Berryman, *Liberation Theology: Essential Facts about the Revolutionary Movement in Latin America—and Beyond* (Oak Park, IL: Meyer-Stone Books, 1987), 53–57, for an exploration of the ways in which the biblical language of Jesus' struggle, death, and vindication have been appropriated in Latin American liberation theology.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0360966900004436 Published online by Cambridge University Press

pened. The question one can not help asking is this: Following this logic whereby theology is so thoroughly subjugated to the logic of cultural norms, how could Haight reasonably expect to end up with a gospel which speaks "prophetically," even "subversively" (his own words) to our culture today? Social injustices are, by their nature, lodged in those dark regions which a society least wishes to have exposed. Thus a prophetic confrontation will most certainly *not* be consistent with a society's prevailing "sensibility." It seems, then, that Haight is willing to defend the primacy of his apologetic approach even to the exclusion of what he earnestly claims is an essential function of christology itself.

While Haight borrows a great deal from Ricoeur, I suggest that there is an important aspect of Ricoeur's symbol theory neglected by Haight which may offer a path through this apparent methodological impasse.[60] It is Ricoeur's notion of symbolic opacity, by which he means the inherent ability of symbols to contain a diversity of meanings simultaneously, including the ability of a single symbol (or symbolic narrative) to possess seemingly contradictory significations. He develops this notion through an exploration of the symbolic narrative of the Fall as found in the book of Genesis, where the ethical vision of evil (arising from human freedom) and the tragic vision of evil (as already existing external to us, articulated in the symbol of the Serpent) operate side by side in a single, coherent narrative. In this way, the narrative successfully captures the human experience of evil as "stain" (something both within and without) by way of a symbolic conundrum. Ricoeur explains that the ability to maintain such a tension is inevitably lost when religious symbols are translated into dogmatic (i.e. non-symbolic) language in such terms as "sin" and "guilt," terms which emphasize the ethical dimension of evil while failing to account for the tragic dimension which so often marks the human experience of evil.[61]

[60]I use "neglected" advisedly here. Haight is certainly well aware of Ricoeur's notion of "polyvalence," a concept closely related to symbolic "opacity" (see Haight, *Jesus*, 57, n. 4). He also lists the "multivalent" structure of symbols among his six traits of symbolic mediation (201, citing Mircea Eliade, but clearly described with Ricoeur in the background). Elsewhere, he describes symbols as "dialectical" in a way which seems roughly equivalent to Ricoeur's opacity: "A symbol is dialectical. This means that from different perspectives it allows for contrary predications, or predications that do not on the face of it cohere" ("A Response to Miller," 182). When Haight applies his theory to Jesus as symbol of God, however, he strips the gospel narratives of precisely such dialectical potential by way of an unyielding insistence that symbol must adhere strictly to the logical norms of his audience.

[61]Ricoeur argues that this movement toward rationalizing symbolic, biblical narrative into dogmatic discourse describes the development of the Christian doctrine of sin. Ricoeur places particular blame on St. Augustine, whose rationale necessitated the sacrifice of one of the two visions of evil—and here the ethical dimension eclipsed the tragic dimension. The resulting doctrine of original sin which eventually gained ascendancy in

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0360966900004436 Published online by Cambridge University Press

In effect, translation into non-symbolic language drains symbols of their opacity.[62] It is Ricoeur's contention that symbols work *not* because they present forceful logical arguments or fit neatly within existing cultural categories, but because they capture phenomenological realities of the human experience in ways which lie beyond the scope of theological and philosophical discourse. For example, though there is much in the narrative of Genesis which has fallen out of favor with modern sensibilities, Ricoeur suggests it is as relevant as ever. It is relevant *not*, of course, by way of a literal, uncritical, first naïveté, but through the application of a hermeneutical second naïveté which accepts symbolic opacity—a notion of symbol wholly compatible with Haight's own project.

Haight would be well served to permit the symbolic narratives of Jesus, including those of the crucifixion, to confront—with all their rich opacity—the postmodern readers he so carefully guards. Let Jesus live his liberating life before this educated, postmodern crowd; but let him also die his gruesome death. In a way, this will require of Haight a loosening of his apologetic grip—or at least a loosening of his own assumptions about post-modern intelligibility in wise deference to the powerful extra-linguistic logic of these ancient and sometimes troubling symbolic narratives. Ricoeur demonstrates that a symbol theory can, in this way, retain a high level of apologetic integrity in a post-critical age, even while permitting symbols the prerogative of grating against our sensibilities from time to time. After all, we might remember that the crucifixion has always posed apologetic challenges to even the most ambitious proclaimers of the gospel. St. Paul was already speaking of the cross of Jesus as a stumbling block and a scandal before the close of the first century.[63] Yet the symbolic narrative of Jesus' suffering has been fiercely preserved through successive generations of Christians precisely for its extra-logical meaning—its opacity of symbolic significance—which has answered, on a variety of levels, the existential needs of humanity despite its offense to prevailing cultural appetites. The symbolic power of the gospel would be tragically impoverished were we to extract all those elements judged to be inconsistent with current cultural tastes. To the contrary, history suggests

Christian theological discourse thus represents for Ricoeur a great impoverishment of the original symbol narrative: "Anti-Gnostic in origin and intention, because evil remains integrally human, the concept of original sin becomes quasi-Gnostic to the degree that it is rationalized" (Paul Ricoeur, "'Original Sin': A Study in Meaning," trans. Peter McCormick, in *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics*, ed. Don Ihde [Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1974], 269–86 at 280).

[62]For an analysis of this internal contradiction of evil as captured in the Adamic myth, see Ricoeur, *Symbolism of Evil*, 243–60.

[63]For example, see 1 Corinthians 1.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0360966900004436 Published online by Cambridge University Press

that therein lie the symbolic truths of the gospel narratives most capable of speaking to, and at times critiquing, society where a prophetic voice, however unpalatable, is most necessary.

VIII. Conclusion

Haight has made a significant contribution to contemporary christological thought with *Jesus Symbol of God*. My intention here has not been to detract from his work, but rather to draw attention to problems in his symbol theory which threaten to diminish the success of his remarkable project. Using the work of Rahner and Ricoeur as backdrops against which Haight's own thought is constructively examined, I am hopeful that a more effective postmodern christology emerges, one which is both faithful to the tradition and transformative in its prophetic power. Haight reminds us that the work of Christian theology is fundamentally a hermeneutical task in which Jesus, symbol of God, serves as the principle text. We might add to this claim another by Ricoeur, who judged the efficacy of religious symbols on their ability, through faithful hermeneutical enterprise, to offer ever-changing audiences "new ways of being in the world."[64]

Even as critics persist in labeling Haight's postmodern reinterpretation as a threat to traditional orthodoxy, *Jesus Symbol of God* stands as a notable testimony to the dynamic ability of the Christian message to reach intelligibly across the ages to diverse audiences when proclaimed with the kind of creativity and courage which mark Haight's work. Among many other lessons, Haight reminds us that rigorous play with the Gospel's elasticity, far from representing a break with tradition, has been a distinctive mark of Christianity's development from the start. The proclamation of Christian doctrine in terms which speak meaningfully to each successive age is not a rupture in the narrative spun by the most venerated theologians of the past. To the contrary, nothing is more consistent with that ancient story.

During his presentation at a recent Mid-Atlantic Regional Meeting of the American Academy of Religion, Haight once again expressed his desire for the Catholic Church to broaden its embrace of acceptable christological visions. He emphasized that far from expecting every Christian to swear allegiance to his own theological vision, he is simply asking instead that his version of Jesus be welcomed as a legitimate conversation partner around the Catholic Church's table.[65] His censure

[64]Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory,* 60, 94.

[65]Roger Haight, "Confessional Christian Theology in the Context of the Wider Human and Religious Conversation," paper delivered at the Mid-Atlantic Regional Meeting of the American Academy of Religion, Baltimore, MD, March 1, 2007.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0360966900004436 Published online by Cambridge University Press

by Rome, however, suggests that his postmodern Jesus may have to wait a little longer for an official invitation. In the meantime, the flurry of activity which continues to surround his *Jesus Symbol of God* proves that Haight's Jesus is showing up for the conversation whether he receives an official welcome or not. But that should hardly surprise us; Jesus has always had a knack for frustrating authorities with his choice of dinner venues and conversation partners.

The conversation is still young. And spirited debate—far from implying illegitimacy—is a good sign that this is a conversation well worth having. As I suggest throughout this essay, many disagreements and arguments lie ahead as theologians seek to reclaim the Jesus who speaks transforming words to a new generation of disciples eager to reconcile postmodern sensibilities with traditional fidelity and prophetic power. But we have Haight to thank, in the first place, for opening new doors of dialogue on these urgent christological issues. May present and future generations of theologians have the requisite courage and imagination to enter the room and raucously extend the conversation around this ever widening table, despite those scrambling to slam the doors and turn the keys. We might take courage in recalling that the resurrected Christ never let a bolted door get in the way of spirited banter with his friends around the table.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0360966900004436 Published online by Cambridge University Press