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Jesus Christ, Religious Pluralism and the Oneness of God: Christology and Changing Social Imaginaries

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Abstract

A strongly Christological Trinitarianism dominated much of twentieth-century theology. In current academic theology, however, there is more talk about God and religion than about Jesus Christ as such. Compared to, say, the 1970s and 1980s, relatively few books in Christology have been published during the last 20 years. This chapter discusses two very different versions of this development. First, the issue of the many religions has become a central issue for systematic theology. This has placed generic God-language and religious experience at the center of much Christian theology rather than the supposedly more particularistic Christology. The second noteworthy trend is a recovery of classical theism, connected with a more general renaissance for Platonic and Aristotelian metaphysics, in contrast to the Christological concentration of twentieth century theology. Possible reasons for this latter development may include the relocation of the center of academic theology from the German- to the English-speaking world, and from Protestant to Catholic theology, including a renaissance for Thomistic thinking. It may also be connected to wider shifts or tendencies in academic culture away from radical historicist, pragmatist, social-constructionist, and "postmodern" theories towards more realist and "essentialist" approaches informed by the natural sciences.

In the early 1980s Roland Spjuth and I worked on a book on contemporary Christology, which received the title *Kristologiska perspektiv.*[1] We focused especially on Edward Schillebeeckx, Wolfhart Pannenberg and Walter

[1] Rasmusson & Spjuth 1986.

Kasper, but we read widely in contemporary Christology. Looking through this book now, not least the endnotes, I am struck by the enormously rich material we could work with at that time. So much was written on Christology during the 1970s and early 1980s. Christology seemed central for otherwise quite different theological traditions, schools and trends, whether for approaches that challenged traditional understandings of incarnation, such as Schillebeeckx, Maurice Wiles, and John Robinson, for political theologies such as those of Jürgen Moltmann and Jon Sobrino, or for somewhat more orthodox approaches ranging from Pannenberg and Kasper to T. F. Torrance and Colin Gunton. Writing a book like that today would be much more difficult. Considerably less has been written on Christology during the last 15 or 20 years than during the 15 or 20 years that preceded 1986. The major exception is the debate among biblical scholars about the historical Jesus, though this debate also seems to have run out of steam recently. And then there are some works on the meaning of the Cross. Perhaps the most interesting work on Christology is now done by historical theologians. There are of course some fairly recent books on Christology by systematic theologians, but compared to the earlier period they are few, and they have not become central works, such as the major volumes on Christology we were reading in the early 1980s.[2]

Moreover, during this earlier period, as during most of the twentieth century, Christology was a decisively ecumenical area. Christology and Trinity constituted the basic grammar for intra-Christian ecumenical dialogue. The interesting differences between Pannenberg, Kasper and Schillebeeckx were not denominationally coded. Radical political theologies, like those of Moltmann and Sobrino, could have much in common with more conservative or moderate approaches, as represented by Pannenberg and Kasper. They all used a similar theological grammar and thus shared enough common ground to have a coherent debate.

Today it is quite different, although the trends – now as then – may point in all sorts of directions. One common thing is that in current academic theology there is more talk about God and religion than Jesus Christ. In what follows, I will offer some comments about this difference,

[2] Three important examples are Henriksen 2009; Tanner 2010; Crisp 2016. See also footnote 38 for German contributions.

highlighting two very different trends. First, I will point to certain socio-cultural and political changes that have made the universal claims associated with traditional Christology more difficult to maintain – or so it seems for many. Second, I will focus on a trend that represents a direct challenge to the first, but with the similarity that it also challenges the type of strongly Christocentric theology that long dominated twentieth-century theology. If the first trend represents a general mode that has characterized both theology and church life for quite a long time now, the second is a more recent and more strictly academic development. This difference will be reflected in the style of the two parts of this essay, the first painting a more broad somewhat impressionistic picture, the second providing a slightly more detailed account of certain recent developments in academic theology.

Jesus Christ and Religious Pluralism

In contemporary theology we find much talk about a generic god or the divine or the spiritual, accompanied by an emphasis on Christianity as one religion among many. In the earlier period, we still lived in the aftermath of a theology of secularization. Then, Christianity was primarily understood against the horizons of history and politics and humanity come of age at the end of religion. What is needed, some said, following Dietrich Bonhoeffer, is a "religionless" Christianity.

Today, in a much more secular Europe, the question of religion is back, both in society and in the academy. The fact of the great variety of human religions had started to become a central problem for systematic theology in the 1970s and 1980s. But this issue did not have the organizing role it has today for so many. Other religions have become present in a more visible way both in terms of world politics and in terms of religious pluralism at home. Christian theology does not only meet secular reason, but religious pluralism as well. In this setting it is Jesus Christ, more than God, who is seen as a problem. Jesus Christ is understood as a problem for a tolerant pluralistic society in so far as he represents more than simply one religious experience among others. In a Christological account, Jesus Christ – his life, death and resurrection – specifies the nature of God; and thus the nature of reality is constituted by Jesus Christ, with implications for the good life, for what following Jesus Christ might mean. This is, for

many, intolerable.[3] It is not just that Christ may represent an overturning of existing values. The very idea that following him gives life a specific direction that excludes other options is objectionable. Christology, which was the center of intra-Christian ecumenics, now becomes a problem for religious dialogue as construed in a secular liberal context where specific religious truth claims are seen as arrogant. One may also observe, within theology itself, a sort of postmodern apophaticism – sometimes conflated with a Kantian critique of metaphysics – employed for similar purposes.

Hans Küng's theology offers an illustration of this development, from the concentration on the life Jesus in *On being a Christian* (originally from 1974) to his focus on developing a global ethics in a world of religious pluralism in his later works.[4] John Hick is another example. In the 1970s he could still see the Incarnation as a symbolic or mythical expression of the commitment by Christians to Jesus Christ, though not an ontological statement about the uniqueness of Jesus. Later on, he criticized a Christ- and church-centered understanding of Christianity, and instead recommended a God-centered understanding of religion, thus defending a form of Unitarianism. But this still excluded non-theistic religions, and so Hick later began turning away from the God-myth as well and instead began talk about the Real.[5]

In such a context, not just Christ, but religion as such is increasingly seen as a problem. Especially after 9/11 religion has been viewed as a threat to an open secular democratic society. From such a perspective almost all "orthodox" accounts of Jesus Christ seem threatening. I recently had a master's level course in which we read, among other things, Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *Discipleship*[6] and Karl Barth's *Christian Life*,[7] two books on the Christian life as a life of following Jesus Christ, of discipleship. Several of the students, both younger students and a few older retired students, described

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[3] Moreover, in certain parts of academia, including theology, the Christian theological tradition is always associated with the inherently colonial, racist, patriarchal, sexist West. In such an account all Christological claims are suspicious. Some forms of feminist theology have also made Christological claims problematic.

[4] Küng 1977; Küng & Kuschel 1993. Cf. Kuokkanen 2012.

[5] Hick 2004. For a discussion of these developments, see D'Costa 2000. See also D'Costa 2015.

[6] Bonhoeffer 2003.

[7] Barth 1981.

both Bonhoeffer's and Barth's texts as "dangerous". They may, of course, be right. Bonhoeffer's text is from the time he was leading the Finkenwalde seminary, and this seminary was closed down by the authorities as politically dangerous. Later on he was hanged. Barth was forced to leave Germany. One leading Lutheran bishop in the Confessing Church described Barth as more dangerous than the Nazi German Christians.[8] For some of my students – and there were also students who liked these books very much – the books by the pacifist Bonhoeffer and Barth (who was not a pacifist, but who considered pacifism the default Christian option) represented a dangerous religious radicalism, more like the Islamic State than acceptable Swedish Lutheran religion. This is one more difference between the 1970s and 1980s and today. When we wrote our book the word "radical" had positive connotations. Now "radicalism" is something dangerous. If you see anyone being "radicalized," you are supposed to call the security police.

However, it is curious that pacifists such as Bonhoeffer are seen, even inside Nordic folk churches, as dangerous, as close to the mentality of the Islamic State, while in my youth political violence was strongly supported by many mainstream Christian theologians in specifically Christological terms, and religious pacifism was attacked as immoral. The established American theologian Paul Lehmann could write like this in 1975:

> According to Jesus, violence is an apocalyptic happening that erupts whenever … the power of systemic violence has provoked the counterviolence of the concrete responsibility … setting straight what is humanizing in the world. ... Apocalyptic reality is beyond justification in the ethical or even in the religious sense. *What is happening with the outbreak of violence is the pressure upon the powers of this world of the God-man structure of the world in making room for the freedom and fulfillment of being human in the world.*[9] The *via dolorosa* leads through the *via guillotina* to the *via humanorum*.[10]

It is quite inconceivable to imagine established Christian theologians so openly defending the use of violence and terror today, though it was mainstream and seen by many as quite unobjectionable in academic theology 40 years ago. One might say that Lehmann is not that far from

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8 Rasmusson 2007.
9 Lehmann 1975, 266–267.
10 Lehmann 1975, 124.

the messianic politics celebrated by not a few theologians today who build on some popular Marxists philosophers. But while their accounts are almost completely unspecified in theoretical, political or historical terms, Lehmann was talking about Lenin, Mao and Castro.

Something has happened since 1986, though these developments began much earlier. It is not that certain arguments have decisively triumphed or that new scientific knowledge has led the way. The modern academy does not represent any coherent intellectual project whatsoever. Our universities provide institutional contexts for a multitude of academic traditions that function like separate islands with little contact. More than a question of research or argument as such, it is a matter of changing social imaginaries partly related to social changes. By social imaginaries I mean, following Charles Taylor, something broader and deeper than intellectual schemes and theories: "the ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations."[11] Such social imaginaries create what seems to be self-evident and restrict what are seen as available options, what can be said and thought, thus providing "a sense of a moral order."[12] Elite theories may over time infiltrate and transform social imaginaries, but direct contact with social practices may also transform the theories themselves.[13]

And this also shapes, for example, how the issue of Christology and interreligious dialog is constructed. If a secular understanding of reality is taken for granted as a given neutral framework, religions are seen as private and individual experiences, visions and life style choices that can be expressed but not argued. Making public claims founded on religion is seen as both arrogant and dangerous. Moreover, argument is impossible because there is really not anything to argue about. One can also say that this form of tolerant pluralism is neither tolerant nor pluralistic, because it does not take the positions of the others as real options. If you cannot be wrong, you

[11] Taylor 2004, 23.

[12] Taylor 2004, 28.

[13] For Taylor's own account of how this works out in our current situation in relation to religion and theology, see Taylor 2007.

cannot be right either. Likewise, theological approaches such as those of Küng and Hick represent the universal mission of liberal modernity more than a "pluralist" understanding of religion.[14] Of course, most theology does not draw such drastic conclusions. There are, for example, creative and interesting efforts to develop a theology of religions on the basis of Trinitarian theology.[15] But there are also many attempts to challenge this whole way of describing the intellectual situation of theology. And this leads us to the second trend I mentioned in the introduction.

Jesus Christ and the Oneness of God

This second trend stands in contrast to the first, but with the similarity that it also – although in very different ways – questions the specific role of Christology for understanding God. It is a recovery of classical theism in contrast to the strongly Christological Trinitarianism that came to dominate twentieth-century theology through the influence of Karl Rahner and Karl Barth and that took on more radical forms in the work of Hans Urs von Balthasar, Jürgen Moltmann, Eberhard Jüngel, Wolfhart Pannenberg, Robert Jenson, Colin Gunton, Catherine Mowry LaCugna and many others. Rahner famously stated: "The 'economic' Trinity is the 'immanent' Trinity and the 'immanent' Trinity is the 'economic' Trinity."[16] He was critical of the division in dogmatic works between accounts of the one God and accounts of the Trinity, where the nature of God is described apart from God's Trinitarian life. As a consequence, the metaphysical properties of God (simplicity, perfection, timelessness, immutability, impassibility, omniscience, and so on) tend to overdetermine the doctrine of God. According to Rahner, one cannot talk about God apart from the doctrine of the Trinity, and the doctrine of the Trinity cannot be separated from how we encounter God in Jesus Christ. Barth similarly could say that "statements about the divine modes of being in themselves cannot be

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[14] See the debates in Hick & Knitter 1987 and D'Costa 1990.

[15] See, e.g., D'Costa 2000. D'Costa (2000, 47) writes: "Trinitarian exclusivism can acknowledge God's action within other traditions, without domesticating or obliterating their alterity, such that real conversation and engagement might occur."

[16] Rahner 2001, 21–22.

different in content from those that are to be made about their reality in revelation."[17] Knowledge of God cannot be separated from the Incarnation.

Other theologians took this further, questioning the metaphysical framework and assumptions of classical theism. Robert Jenson writes, "The God to be interpreted in this work is the triune God. For the doctrine of Trinity is but a conceptually developed and sustained insistence that God himself is identified by and with the particular plotted sequence of events that make the narrative of Israel and her Christ."[18] Jüngel claims that "this distinction between God and God based on the cross of Jesus Christ has destroyed the axiom of absoluteness, the axiom of apathy, and the axiom of immutability, all of which are unsuitable axioms for the Christian concept of God. … Only the God who is identical with the Crucified One makes us certain of his love and thus of himself."[19]

This Rahner-Barth legacy, which I focus on, is part of a more general criticism of the traditional doctrine of God, a doctrine the critics see as most clearly synthesized and formulated by Thomas Aquinas. To summarize, beginning in the eighteenth century but culminating during the twentieth century, critics have often, in quite different ways, claimed that the traditional doctrine of God is built on an abstract rationalistic analysis of what the idea of God logically entails that cannot do justice to the living God described in the biblical narratives. This is often combined with the claim that the traditional understanding is built on an Aristotelian substance metaphysics that we do not use anymore. And for much theology after Kant, metaphysics as such has become a problem. More specifically, it is claimed, the traditional metaphysical doctrine of God raises the problems of God's relation to evil and of God's freedom. Finally, from the direction of political, feminist and postcolonial theologies questions are raised about the political, cultural and moral implications of the image of sovereignty entailed in the traditional doctrine.

Recently, however, these revisionary accounts, including the Rahner-Barth legacy, have been increasingly challenged. This challenge tends to be connected with a more general renaissance of Platonic and Aristotelian metaphysics, especially as developed by Thomas Aquinas, or in certain

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[17] Barth 1975, 479.
[18] Jenson 1997, 60.
[19] Jüngel 1983, 373.

interpretations of Aquinas. The revival of Thomism (sometimes called Thomistic Ressourcement) is one of the more influential developments in recent academic theology, also influencing non-Catholic theology and theologians not describing themselves as Thomists. This Thomistic renaissance is not a unified movement. We find very different readings of Aquinas. But it has led to a critical reaction towards what I have called the Rahner-Barth legacy. Within Roman Catholicism there is furthermore increasing reaction not only against Rahner, but also against Henri de Lubac and even more von Balthasar, who are often regarded as Catholic parallels to Barth for emphasizing a Christocentric and biblical approach to theology as an alternative to the form of neo-Thomism that dominated Catholic theology until Vatican II.[20]

However, I will not primarily focus here on developments in Catholic theology. Instead, I will offer two examples of this recent rethinking of the role of Christology for understanding the doctrine of God from non-Roman Catholic scholars, both of whom, however, are strongly influenced by the Platonic-Thomistic renaissance: the influential Orthodox theologian David Bentley Hart, sometimes associated with Radical Orthodoxy (and Radical Orthodoxy itself, especially as espoused by John Milbank, reflects

[20] For a good overview and a critical discussion of these developments, see Long 2016. Long is also himself an example of the return to Thomas. At the center of what Long calls "the 'traditional answer' to the question of God" (Long 2016, ix) (he prefers not to use the designation "classical theism") is the idea of God's simplicity, which means that God's essence is God's existence, that there is an identity between *what* and *that* God is. From this follows that there are no parts and no potentiality in God and the attributes of God cannot be distinguished from each other. If God's simplicity is accepted, it logically follows that God is perfect, infinite, eternal, immutable, and impassible. Long thinks this idea has been best synthesized by Thomas Aquinas, but the basic idea continued to be accepted and presupposed by Protestant Reformers and their followers. Many Thomas-scholars argue that one should clearly distinguish between knowledge that reason itself can provide and the knowledge faith generates. This is also the position of Vatican I. Long argues, together with some Catholic theologians and Thomas interpreters, that this sharp distinction is misplaced. "Thomas presents simplicity as something that can be known about God by reason, but if it is only known by reason God will not be properly known, for simplicity can also mislead. Divine Trinity establishes the context to know how God is, and is not, simple, immutable, perfect, and so on." (Long 2016, 9.) It is symptomatic of the trends that I describe that it seems easier to find recent books on the simplicity of God than on Christology. In addition to Long, see e.g. Dolezal 2011; Duby 2016; Hinlicky 2016. Three of these four books are from 2016. Hinlicky (2016, xix), who represents the Rahner-Barth legacy, is critical of the traditional doctrine of simplicity and promotes a "'weak' or 'eschatological' simplicity."

this development), and the Barth scholar and Episcopal priest Katherine Sonderegger. Both defend a Trinitarian theology and orthodox Christology, but they think one has to start, not with Christology, but with a concept of the One God.

David Bentley Hart can write a whole book on how to define the word "God" without once mentioning Christ.[21] His critical front in the book in question, *The Experience of God*, is secular naturalism, and he argues for a concept of God common to most religious traditions including Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism and at least some forms of Buddhism. Not long ago, such an approach – defending an abstract concept of God instead of the actual Trinitarian God – was seen by people as different from one another as Michael Buckley and Eberhard Jüngel as the apologetic mistake that created an opening for the typical modern forms of political and protest atheism.[22] But today the situation is different. Theology is now challenging a dominant secular naturalism in the academy. In this instance, a broadly construed theistic understanding of reality may seem easier to handle than a Trinitarian account, which may appear too highly particularist in relation to scientific secular naturalism. For Hart, most major religious traditions stand together at this point against secular naturalism.

Hart's theology is otherwise distinctly Trinitarian and Christological, as seen, for example, in his earlier book *The Beauty of the Infinite*. He says that Rahner's maxim describes "the necessary shape of all theological rationality." He continues: "Trinitarian thought uninformed by the gospel narrative results, inevitably, in an impoverishment of both that thought and that narrative; hence the importance of the affirmation that the Trinity as economic or as immanent is the one God as he truly is, whose every action is proper to and expressive of his divinity."[23] Moreover, Hart's understanding of the shape of the Church and Christian life is distinctly Christological. Christ "initiates a real counterhistory, a new practice and a new form of life that is … the true story of the world"[24], although someone like Barth would not express it in this way.

However, this earlier book also represents the reaction against the Rahner-Barth legacy. Hart thinks that the twentieth-century revival of

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[21] Hart 2013
[22] Jüngel 1983; Buckley 1987.
[23] Hart 2003, 156.
[24] Hart 2003, 326.

Trinitarian theology has taken different forms: some (including himself) have returned to patristic and medieval sources, while others also respond to the Trinitarian metaphysics of Hegel, Schelling and others (this includes, he says, Pannenberg, Moltmann, Jüngel, and Jenson). And he thinks that this second group tends to collapse the necessary analogical interval between immanent and economic Trinity, between timeless eternity and historical time, when it talks about the becoming of God, of God's temporality, of God determining Godself, or of God suffering in Christ. This assumes the existence of potentiality in God, something that classical Christian theology has denied. Hart also defends the development of a sort of Christian Platonism as a providential development that Christians cannot deny. He can, for example, describe Dionysius the Areopagite as "that most biblical of theologians".[25] If Christian Platonism is not a problem for theology, however, Hart thinks the alliance between German idealism and theology most certainly is. [26]

The most damaging consequence of the collapse of the analogical interval, according to Hart, is the idea that what happens in the history of Jesus determines God becoming God, which means that the death on the cross is part of God's reality. The consequence is that evil, and the whole history of evil, becomes constitutive of God's eternal identity, and that God's goodness becomes a reactive goodness that requires evil to be fully real.[27] Thus, against much recent theology, he strongly defends the idea of God's *apatheia* as necessary for conceiving of God as love.[28]

It is also this interval that makes it possible for Hart to distinguish between metaphysical and confessional descriptions of God – in Christian terms between *de Deo uno* and *de Deo trino* – and to write a book that only deals with the metaphysical God, *de Deo uno*. Although God is finally beyond finite human grasp, God can be "reasoned toward, intimately encountered, directly experienced with a fullness surpassing mere conceptual comprehension."[29] No one can really avoid God's reality. "For to say that God is being, consciousness, and bliss is also to say that he is

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[25] Hart 2003, 242.
[26] Hart 2005b.
[27] Hart 2003, 165.
[28] On the Christian theology and the suffering and evil, see also Hart 2005a.
[29] Hart 2013, 31.

the one reality in which all our existence, knowledge, and love subsist, from which they come and to which they go, and that therefore he is somehow present in even our simplest experience of the world, and is approachable by way of a contemplative and moral refinement of that experience."[30]

Jüngel could talk about God's worldly nonnecessity, but nonnecessity only because God is *more than* necessary.[31] Hart does not say that God is necessary for thought – one can affirm absurdity, after all – but in his view there is no coherent alternative to theism. Naturalism certainly does not represent such an alternative, or so Hart claims. There is, it seems, a strong apologetic intent behind this book, although Hart is quite critical of thinking of Christian truth as a necessary universal truth of reason.[32] However, it would be difficult to write a book like this and include Christ.

One major strand in the first volume of Katherine Sonderegger's systematic theology, published in 2015, is precisely a systematic attack on the Christological focus in nineteenth and twentieth century theology, both Protestant and Catholic.[33] In this she includes Protestant theology from Barth, via Jüngel and Moltmann, to Jenson, Rowan Williams and Kathryn Tanner and Catholic theologians such as Lubac, Erich Pryzwara, Rahner, von Balthasar and Mowry LaCugna. This development also strongly shaped Vatican II. Against this Christological concentration Sonderegger asserts that Christian theology has to begin with the oneness of God, and one has to separate the question "What is God?" from "Who is God?" Much modern theology, in her view, has mistakenly assimilated the What-question into the Who-question. It is this mistake that has placed the Trinity and thus Christology at the beginning. But the What-question must be answered before the Who-question. Thus, the doctrine of God should not, she claims, be grounded in the incarnate life of Jesus Christ.

God's nature is One. "Oneness governs the Divine Perfections: all in the doctrine of God must serve, set forth, and conform to the transcendent Unity of God."[34] On this Judaism, Christianity and Islam are united.

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[30] Hart 2013, 44.

[31] Jüngel 1983, 14–35.

[32] Hart 2003, 3.

[33] Sonderegger (2015, xvii) says that her approach " marks a sharp break from the contours and method of most Western theology, Catholic and Protestant alike."

[34] Sonderegger 2015, xiv.

In Christian theology, the Trinity presupposes and begins with the One God, not with Jesus. The incarnation does not involve a change in God, but a new relation between God and creation. She writes, "The reality of God, God *a se*, is truly encountered as such in the world and the intellect He has made."[35] This is not, she claims, to start with an abstract metaphysical concept of God, but to follow how the Divine Perfections are displayed in Scripture. The book therefore tries to be faithful to the biblical way of naming and describing these perfections, which include infinity, omnipotence, omnipresence, immutability, impassibility, and goodness. As such, God is also subject, person, love, the Living One. She writes that "in all His unsearchable and infinite Mystery, God is Person and Nature, Subject and Substance: One God."[36] And she thinks that this understanding of the Oneness of God goes together with the centrality that opposition to idolatry has in Scripture. For someone like Robert Jenson it is the other way around: beginning with a metaphysical account of God separate from God's revelation in Israel and Jesus Christ risks creates the space for "idolatrous projections."[37]

Sonderegger is not, of course, anti-Christological. She is writing a full-scale, multivolume systematic theology, so one may expect a major treatment of Christology in the future. She wants, also in some contrast to recent theology, to stress not just his humanity, but also what it means that Christ in his divine nature is the One God, omniscient, omnipotent and omnipresent.

The issues raised by Hart, Sonderegger, and many others are not new. The interesting question is why these issues now seem more central and urgent for many theologians than before, and why the lines of argument we find in Hart and Sonderegger seem more persuasive for many now than they did thirty years ago. Again, my interest here is not the arguments themselves, however interesting and important they are, as much as the changes in what I called the social imaginary, the practices and background convictions that make arguments convincing for certain people and contexts. As this, so far, largely represents changes in academic theology (although it is connected

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[35] Sonderegger 2015, 41.
[36] Sonderegger 2015, xiii–xiv.
[37] Jenson 1997, 59.

to broader developments), I will primarily focus in what follows on the academic context.

I do not have clear answers as to why these developments in theology are happening now. It is easier to understand the reasons for the first trend described above. However, I do have some suggestions. One might think that this second trend has to do with the fact that the English-speaking world now dominates academic theology in a way it did not thirty years ago. Even in German theology, Christology does not have the central role it once had, and the consequences of the first trend are as visible there as elsewhere; but the development exemplified by Hart and Sonderegger is not as pronounced in German theology as in English-speaking theology.[38] Moreover, Anglo-American theologians are now much less dependent on German theology than they were during much of the twentieth century, though they still engage it. If they turn to recent Continental sources, it is French Thomism that now seems most important.[39] The philosophical cultures are also different, although the difference we see in this context is not one between analytical and Continental philosophy.[40] In the English-speaking world the Kantian criticism of metaphysics is no longer as persuasive as it has been in Germany, and German idealism is not such a self-evident context as it has been for much Germany theology. One way of narrating the centrality of Christology in modern theology is precisely to say that Schleiermacher's Christocentrism was a response to Kant's critique of metaphysics, that theologians such as Albert Ritschl and Wilhelm Herrmann continued it further, and that Barth (despite his turn against Protestant liberalism) and Rahner preserved this post-Kantian Christocentrism, though in a new mode.

Moreover, Platonism, neo-Aristotelianism, and Thomism play increasingly important roles in Anglo-American philosophy in general. This is due

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[38] There are more recent works on Christology in German theology than in Anglo-American theology. Three recent works from the Protestant side are by Michael Welker, Gunther Wenz and Christian Danz. Although very different, they all stand in continuity with the twentieth century German traditions (Welker in the Rahner-Barth legacy, Danz in the subjectivist line of Schleiermacher, and Wenz somewhere in-between). Welker 2013; Wenz 2011; Danz 2013.

[39] There does not seem to be much of aThomist turn in German Catholic theology.

[40] However, another strong development in Anglo-American theology is the so-called Analytical theology movement. It represents a very different philosophical outlook than Platonism and Thomism. Long spends a whole chapter defending the traditional view of God's simplicity against criticisms from Analytical theology. See Long 2016, 219–272.

in no small part to the work of Alasdair MacIntyre, which has opened up new ways of doing moral and political philosophy. The philosophical world has changed dramatically since 1981, when his *After Virtue* was published, though his perspective can be, and has been, taken in quite different directions. MacIntyre himself developed in a Thomistic direction.[41] The renewal of Thomistic moral theology, partly influenced by MacIntyre, later led to the attempt to do the same with historical and dogmatic theology. Recent Thomist scholars have, moreover, criticized the picture of Thomas and Thomism as excessively rationalistic and stressed the biblical and patristic roots of his thought and how it serves theological ends. At the same time, others have tried to show the continuing fruitfulness of his metaphysical thought. We noted above how Hart can describe the Platonic and Aristotelian traditions as providential parts of the Christian theological tradition.

The earlier critique of the role of "Greek philosophy"[42] and substance metaphysics in theology, not least in Christology, was often combined with an emphasis on God as subject, a claim that the divinity of Jesus Christ is mediated through his *relationship* with the Father, a notion of revelation as history, and the central role of narrativity. These emphases cannot be explained by the influence of German idealism alone, but philosophers in the idealist tradition – and Hegel not least – did play an important role. Many thought that Hegel helped theology move from thinking God as substance to God as absolute subject and to talking about God as event. Stephen Long speaks about an assumed Luther-Hegel-Barth trajectory in theologians such as Jüngel and Moltmann. However, he thinks this builds in part on misreadings of both Luther and Barth.[43]

The emphasis on reality as history rather than as cosmic order is connected with making politics central for theology. And much political theology, including feminist theology, has been very critical of a substance metaphysics that describes God, so they say, in abstract and static terms, as impassible and immutable, unable to participate in the suffering of creation.

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[41] MacIntyre 1981. See also, for a defense of a Thomist perspective, MacIntyre 1990.

[42] Jenson (1997, 10) describes Greek philosophy as "simply the theology of the historically particular Olympian-Parmenidean religion, later shared with the wider Mediterranean cultic world", something the Church Fathers mostly were clear about.

[43] Long 2016, 334–338.

Furthermore, they often describe the role of Thomism in supporting the order of Christendom. Others also connect these developments to a de-judaization of Christianity in which the historical and eschatological perspective is replaced by a more vertical metaphysical understanding of the cosmic order.

In addition to the return of metaphysics in philosophy, however, it may be that the recent return to Platonic, Aristotelian and Thomistic thinking is also connected to wider shifts or tendencies in the humanities, in political and social theory, and in the social sciences away from radical historicist, pragmatist, social constructionist, and "postmodern" theories towards more realist and "essentialist" approaches, often built on influences from biology, neuroscience, psychology, the cognitive sciences, and so forth.[44] It may seem that Thomism has better resources for meeting these developments. This then immediately also raises questions of how to talk about God and the role of Christology.

If this is so, a related reason may be the increasing dominance of Catholic theology, even among many Protestants, outside Protestant Continental theology. This is as visible in Sweden as in Britain and North-America. John Milbank describes this in characteristically stark terms.

> The Anglo-Saxon countries and France have displaced Germany as the fulcrum of international theological activity. The debate within Protestant theology has ceased to be the decisive one for all theology, much affecting Catholic theology also. Today, instead, it is the debate within Catholic theology that is the vital one, to such a degree that a definitively Protestant theology is now extinct, even though Protestants are still doing much interesting and important work. (And one thinks here especially of the decisive writings of Stanley Hauerwas.)[45]

Theological liberalism, he thinks (and this relates to the first trend described in this chapter), "has rather mutated into various modes of academic 'religious study' and various pragmatic endeavours to keep the peace between religions and between religion and secularity."[46] Moreover, the fact that the divide between Catholic and Protestant (and Orthodox)

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[44] For four very different discussions of this, see Pinker 2002; Slingerland 2008; Tallis 2011; Smith 2015.

[45] Milbank 2010, 27.

[46] Milbank 2010, 28.

theology is not academically institutionalized in Britain, USA or Sweden in the way it is in Germany is probably also important. Catholics, different sorts of Protestants and Orthodox theologians work together in the same institutions.[47] The differences between Protestant and Catholic tend to be deemphasized. And recently, Catholic theology has influenced Protestant theology more than the other way around. Milbank talks about the emergence of an "interconfessional Catholicism" in academic theology. Moreover, it is not only a matter of Catholic theology influencing Protestant theology; there is also among academics (both inside and outside theology) a noticeable move from Protestantism to Catholicism, although among ordinary believers more people move in the other direction.

At the same time, new divisions, now within Catholic academic culture, have become visible. Here I am not thinking of the divisions between "conservatives" and "progressives". Thomas Joseph White describes three main tendencies in Catholic theology over the last twenty years: the decline of Rahnerianism, the rising influence of the Communio movement (theologians such as de Lubac, von Balthasar and Joseph Ratzinger), and most recently a Thomistic renaissance (which includes, besides White himself, theologians such as Steven A. Long and Reinhard Hütter).[48] Milbank, whose own sympathies lie with the second group, describes the latter two tendencies as Romantic and Classic orthodoxy. In Milbank's description the former stresses a type of "feeling intellect", "the role of the 'erotic' – the passions, the imagination, art, *ethos* etc."[49] – for an adequate theology. According to Milbank, something like this Romantic orthodoxy was the dominant approach in Christian theology up to and including Aquinas. What Milbank call Classic orthodoxy represents for him a return to neo-Thomistic rationalism (before Vatican II best represented by Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange), the sort of Thomism that the Romantics

[47] Stephen Long, a Methodist, is just one example of this. In his preface Long (2016, xiv–xv) says that his work on the question of the simplicity of God began over lunches in graduate school at Duke University with his Catholic fellow student Fritz Bauerschmidt (who turned into an Aquinas-scholar) and continued first when he was teaching at the Jesuit St. Joseph's University and then led doctoral seminars on Thomas Aquinas at the Protestant Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary, and then again at the Jesuit Marquette University. He finished the book during his present position at Southern Methodist University.

[48] White 2014.

[49] Milbank 2010, 28.

tried to overcome. White calls it a Thomistic renaissance or a Thomistic Ressourcement, and this latter group challenges de Lubac's and Milbank's reading of the history and their interpretations of Thomas.[50] But also for Milbank himself the importance of Thomas's thought has grown over time, and he has simultaneously become increasingly more critical of von Balthasar especially.

Both Classical and Romantic Catholicism directly challenge secular naturalism and the secular liberal order. Both think that Barth and von Balthasar failed to do that because they failed to challenge the post-Kantian framework and therefore failed – Barth more than von Balthasar – to overcome the oppositions between nature and grace and between reason and revelation, thus accepting the existence of an autonomous secular sphere. Their Trinitarian theology and Christology tend to float "free of all speculative ontology rooted in our natural powers of comprehension".[51] Milbank thinks that the new Thomists, because of the way they distinguish knowledge based on reason from knowledge based on revelation, also in practice accept an autonomous secular reason. These Thomists do not accept this description, however, insisting that their defense of natural reason is not a defense of secular reason.

Theologians such as Barth, Rahner, and von Balthasar tried to begin thinking Christology in a post-Christendom situation. Part of their criticism of Platonic and Thomistic Christologies was that they tended to de-eschatologize Christianity and make Christology into a metaphysical support for Christendom. Rahner and von Balthasar could talk about the church as a diaspora. I have elsewhere described Barth's mature theology as a form of post-Christendom theology.[52] Barth describes the Christian life as grounded in the new reality of the kingdom come in Jesus Christ, but he does not want to develop out of this a general moral or political theory, an ethics for anyone directly applicable to the political order. He writes, "The decisive contribution which the Christian community can make to the upbuilding and work and maintenance of the civil consists in the witness which it has to give to it and to all human societies in the form of the order

[50] For criticism of Milbank's description, see Hütter 2012, esp. 127–246.
[51] Milbank 2005, 74.
[52] Rasmusson 2005.

of its own upbuilding and constitution."[53] The specific role of Christology in Barth's or von Balthasar's theology is not primarily a function of their Kantianism, but of their attempt to take seriously the drama and the strangeness of the biblical witness to Jesus and to understand the Christian life in terms of an ecclesial following of Christ in a world Christians do not control.

One might possibly read Hart along these lines, and even at times the early Milbank. But today Milbank defends a political order built on a combination of Greek and Judeo-Christian principles. Here Christology functions as a part of a moral and political ontology (he talks about Christological constitutionalism, and Christology plays a central role in his discussions of the monarchic principle). Milbank therefore also strongly defends an established church, such as in England,[54] and sees free churches and the nonconformists as part of what created modern secular liberalism.[55]

My point here is not to say that Hart and Sonderegger and their like follow Milbank in this. I doubt they do. I simply use him to illustrate various developments in recent academic theology, developments that constitute the context in which Hart and Sonderegger work. Milbank's account also demonstrates the interconnectedness of Christology, ecclesiology, eschatology, ethics and politics. Different forms of Platonic and Thomistic approaches to theology entail not only various changes in how to talk about God, but perhaps also adjustments of Christian thinking about science, politics and ethics, and thus also of ecclesiology and the church's life in the world. And the converse is also true: socio-political developments and changes in moral and ecclesiological practices shape how Christian intellectual traditions are seen and used. What I describe in this chapter are ongoing and sometimes very recent developments, and we

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[53] Barth 1958, 721.

[54] Milbank 2013, 214–218, Milbank & Pabst 2016, 219–220, 232–236.

[55] In the June/July 2016 issue of *First Things* one can find two longer articles on Christianity and liberalism. David Bentley Hart points to the incompatibility between Christianity and capitalism, and therefore between Christianity and liberalism. Franceska Aran Murphy, on the other hand, contends that the market economy and liberalism have Christian roots. To argue this, she builds on the tradition from Maurice Blondel, de Lubac and von Balthasar (against the antiliberal neo-Thomism of people like Garrigou-Lagrange). Ironically, she says, recent neo-Blondelians such as Milbank and David Schindler, have once again returned to a sharp antiliberalism. Hart 2016; Murphy 2016.

cannot tell where they may lead. For example, defending the idea of the simplicity of God may not necessarily lead to radical rethinking of how to understand, say, the relationship between church and world. Rahner and Barth, after all, defended versions of divine simplicity. One might want to defend an analogical interval between the immanent and economic Trinity without following Sonderegger all the way. Some of the connections I have described have more to do with implicit social imaginaries than with argumentative necessity. A postsecular theology, a theology which does not accept the hegemony of secular reason, may likewise take different forms. One may, like Milbank, try to overthrow secular reason with a Christian reason, or, like some Thomists, try to outreason modern secular reason with an Aristotelian-Thomistic understanding of natural reason. Or one might adopt a more ad-hoc approach that accepts the diaspora reality of the church and Christian reasoning and consequently does not think in terms of controlling the intellectual and political orders.

A final note. After I had written this, I discovered the most recent big book on Christology, *The Incarnate Lord: A Thomistic Study in Christology,* from 2015 by Thomas Joseph White.[56] This book exemplifies all the trends I have described, except that it focuses on Christology. It is written by an English-speaking Catholic theologian. White thinks that most modern Protestant theology is shaped by Kant's criticism of metaphysics and Kant's separation of the noumenal from the phenomenal. This is the case, he claims, both for Schleiermacher and Barth, though in different ways. Furthermore, White thinks that the way out of this Kantian malaise is to be found in a return to Thomism – not a revisionary Thomism refracted through Kantianism and post-Kantian continental philosophy, but classical Thomistic thought, and especially the thought of Thomas himself. Thomist metaphysics has, he argues, the resources for developing an adequate Christology that can engage with modern science and historical consciousness.

Perhaps this book can become a beginning of renewed work on Christology, and it may also challenge non-Thomists to rethink their own work on Christology.[57]

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[56] White 2015.

[57] I have had great help from colleagues and friends writing this text. Among them are Roland Spjuth, Mårten Björck, Friederike Nüssel, Joe Mangina, Martin Westerholm, Stephen Long, Andreas Nordlander, Ola Sigurdson, Bengt Rasmusson, Kalle Carlstein and Fredrik Wenell. Ross Wagner corrected my English.

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