

**Christological Controversies.** Owing to the central place of Christ in Christian thought (quite different from, say, the place of Buddha in Buddhist thought), there has always been controversy over his person and work. The early centuries witnessed the rise and virtual demise of several Christological heresies which in their day threatened the developing stream of orthodoxy. The Ebionites thought of Jesus Christ as a human, Jewish Messiah, to the neglect of his divinity. The Gnostics argued that the “incarnation” was a temporary donning of human flesh, for appearance’s sake, by some deity less than the high God. The Arians conceived of the Son of God as a lesser deity. Denying the two natures, they argued that the nature of the Son took the place of the human soul in the historical Jesus Christ. By contrast, Apollinarius, while agreeing with the Arians that Christ had but one nature, held that nature to be thoroughly divine, displacing any human soul, such that the “human” properties of Christ were nothing more than the animal elements found in human nature. Monarchianism, in both its forms, preserved the unity of the Godhead by embracing merely functional distinctions between the Father and the Son, effectively denying the Son’s subsistence as God. The Nestorians, eager to preserve Christ’s human experience, effectively divided his humanity and divinity so sharply that it was difficult to see how they avoided embracing two persons.

Some of these heresies have resurfaced in new forms during the last one hundred years or so. Arianism, for instance, lies at the heart of the Christological convictions of the Jehovah’s Witnesses; some forms of New Age thought seem remarkably similar to some features of ancient Gnosticism. The reason for the chasms that divide people with one set of Christological convictions from those with a quite different set is that all sides have insisted that Christology matters. It matters, finally, for how one understands Christianity, and thus salvation itself—and therefore the church’s mission. The same sorts of things

could be said about the more radical of the assorted Christologies generated by skeptical application of the historical-critical method during the last two centuries (cf. Henry; Runia).

But the most recent Christological controversies have been generated not so much by alternative interpretations of the sacred text, as by constructions that simultaneously recognize the validity of many elements of orthodox Christology while setting it in a framework that relativizes it. Thus Panikkar argues that, while Christ is incarnated in Jesus, Christ cannot be identified with Jesus: Christ is always more than Jesus. Christianity may have a monopoly on Jesus, but not on Christ. God has disclosed himself in Christ, and doubtless for Christians the historical connection is Jesus. But for Hindus, Christ has manifested himself in a different form appropriate to that religious structure. Thus there is a "cosmic Christ." Rahner would add that this means there are "anonymous Christians," people who are Christians without ever having heard of Christ, or even in some cases who have repudiated Christianity as they have experienced it while accepting the (unrecognized) "Christ" in their own religious heritage.

Something similar is done with some forms of *Logos-Christologies*. If the "Word" is the light that enlightens every person (John 1:9), then it would be wrong to insist that Christianity has some decisive advantage. In an alternative construction, Hick argues that the only way genuine pluralism can prevail among the religions is to postulate that there is an ultimate Reality (not even "God," since some religions have more to do with ritual and veneration of ancestors than with any deity) that stands more or less equivalently behind all religions. Thus it is entirely appropriate for Christians to worship within the framework of Christian theology; it is inappropriate for them to tell others that they ought to do so too.

In this way, some positions espoused in the most recent Christological controversies wipe out the sense of mission, classically conceived, in which Christian believers share and proclaim the good news that in Christ God is reconciling to himself a people from every tongue and people and tribe and nation. That is now likely to be dismissed as cultural imposition or, worse, colonial manipulation. The only Christological heresy left is the view that there is such a thing as Christological heresy. You may believe what you will, but you must never say that the eternal salvation of anyone is in any way tied to belief in a particular Jesus Christ.

The issues at stake are extraordinarily complex. Here it is enough to say that the exclusive claims advanced by and in behalf of Christ cannot be so easily dismissed. Despite protests, Christians who ostensibly believe in the Christian Christ while adhering to the views of Panikkar or

Hick are not believing the Christian Christ at all. Some of the erroneous views are deeply rooted in demonstrably false exegesis. More importantly, "Christ" is not a cipher or an abstract notion that can be dropped into any religious structure. Jesus Christ belongs to the pattern of redemptive history that is reflected in the Bible's plot-line. Within the meta-narrative of Scripture the biblical Christ has a coherent place. Remove him from this plotline, and it is not the same Christ. To put it another way, one cannot properly appreciate the biblical Christ (whether to accept or reject him) *apart* from a firm grasp of the Bible's story-line in which he is embedded. In that case the urgency of mission is retained.

One must also say that many Christological controversies around the world at first glance seem less traumatic, since they have to do with the attempt to anchor gospel presentation of Christ in the Scriptures while finding lines of burning relevance to local hearers. If the appeal for relevance is primary, however, the Christ we present may become domesticated to the culture. On the other hand, every generation, every culture, needs to continually ask the foundational questions regarding who Christ is, as the Bible portrays him. It is not surprising that poor believers in forsaken barrios fasten on Jesus' sensitivity to the poor and his striking calls for justice. It is not surprising that African believers note the emphasis on the corporate nature of the people of God. It is not surprising that zealous believers in the Western tradition are struck by Jesus' urgent calls to active mission. This may be all to the good. The test in every case is whether some elements of biblical Christology are being blown out of proportion while others are ignored. The final synthesis needs to be recognizably the Christ of the Bible. Alternatively, even if the emphases are different, there must be a humble pursuit of biblical balance in the efforts of every generation and culture of believers to articulate who Jesus Christ is, as he is disclosed in Scripture. Christological controversy that is seeking to recover the holism of biblical Christology in a world that constantly veers toward assorted reductionisms is a healthy thing.

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SEE ALSO Uniqueness of Christ.

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