

CHALLENGES IN CONTEMPORARY THEOLOGY

THE BROKEN BODY

ISRAEL, CHRIST AND FRAGMENTATION



Sarah Coakley

WILEY Blackwell

THE BROKEN BODY

Challenges in Contemporary Theology

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THE BROKEN BODY

Israel, Christ and Fragmentation

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*For Arthur, Theodore (Teddy) and Simon Claude,
the next generation of seekers for Christ*

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Preface

This book is a successor to an earlier volume in the *Challenges in Contemporary Theology* series, which was entitled *Powers and Submissions: Spirituality, Philosophy and Gender* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002).¹ I characterized that earlier book, at the time, as my first volume of *Gesammelte Schriften*, an accompaniment to an emerging project in systematic theology which was, and is, also ongoing.² Unlike that earlier volume of essays, however (where the cluster of themes which united its content were only identified retroactively), this current book has been planned for a long time, and the chapters drawn together here were always intended to fit together into a cumulative argument about contemporary Christology and its purviews. The core theme of ‘brokenness’ (in all its ambiguity and richness), and its relation to various forms of ‘apophaticism’, in both speech and practice, is explored analytically in the Prologue that follows.

Over the years in which these essays were researched and written, I have accumulated a great number of debts to other scholars and colleagues, discussion partners in Jewish/Christian dialogue (both in Israel and elsewhere), and above all to my former students and research assistants at Harvard and Cambridge. In the last category I must first and foremost thank Philip McCosker, Mark Nussberger, Shai Held, Michon Matthiesen, Timothy Dalrymple, Cameron Partridge, Hjärdis Becker-Lindenthal, and (in the very last stages of editorial work), Amanda Bourne in Alexandria, VA. This book simply could not have

¹ This is now prospectively planned to be re-published by Wiley-Blackwell in a 2nd edition, with a new authorial essay on critical responses and debate included.

² The first volume was published as *God, Sexuality and the Self: An Essay ‘On the Trinity’* (Cambridge: C.U.P., 2013), and the second volume, *Sin, Racism and Divine Darkness: An Essay ‘On Human Nature’* (Cambridge: C.U.P., 2025) is forthcoming.

taken the shape it has without their extraordinary practical, linguistic and theological assistance of every sort: *gratias ago vobis*.

But I am no less grateful to another ‘great cloud of witnesses’, some alas no longer living, whose influence and conversation is writ large throughout these pages. Amongst these I must mention especially, with deep appreciation (and in the case of the first names in this list, *in piam memoriam*): †Joseph Blenkinsopp, †Joseph (Jossi) Dan, †David Hartman, †Aaron Lazare, †Robert Murray, S.J., †Krister Stendahl, †John Webster; and Gary A. Anderson, Erik Aurelius, Elitzur Bar-Asher, Anthony Baxter, John Behr, Markus Bockmuehl, John W. Bowker, Brian Britt, Sebastian Brock, Jack Caputo, Andrew Chester, Fr. Maximos (Nicholas) Conostas, Richard Cross, Brian E. Daley, S.J., Stephen T. Davis, Paul DeHart, C. Stephen Evans, Michael Fishbane, David F. Ford, Yehuda (Jerome) Gellman, Alon Goshen-Gottstein, Richard B. Hays, Moshe Halbertal, Charles Hefling, William Horbury, Peter Kang, Cleo McNelly Kearns, Ed Kessler, Arthur Kleinman, Martin Laird, O.S.A., Jon Levenson, Andrew Louth, Christoph Marksches, Giulio Maspero, Bruce McCormack, John Milbank, Jeremy Milgrom, R. W. L. Moberly, David Newheiser, David Novak, Gerald O’Collins, S.J., Kimberly C. Patton, Beverly Roberts Gaventa, Eugene Rogers, Christian Schlenker, Jon Schofer, Kate Sonderegger, Carol Steiker, Jesper Svartvik, Richard Swinburne, Kathryn Tanner, Keith Ward, Michael Welker, Merold Westphal, and Rowan Williams.

The second section of this book consists of four hermeneutical investigations of topics that supposedly divide Judaism and Christianity definitively. These essays were originally explored in very rich and deep conversations at the Shalom Hartman Institute, the Tantar Ecumenical Institute, and the Swedish Theological Institute, in Israel; and at conferences supported by the Templeton Foundation in Cambridge, and by the Research Centre of Interdisciplinarity and Theology in Heidelberg. I am greatly indebted to all these places of learning and of scholarly and inter-religious conviviality, and to the remarkable people who lead them.

The last four chapters of this book were originally presented as ‘named’ lectures in two venues: as the Hensley Henson Lectures at Oxford; and later (in slightly revised form) as the John Albert Hall Lectures at the University of Victoria, British Columbia, Canada. I am most grateful to those who made my sojourns in those two places

both memorable personally, and also suggestive of the need for further reflection and revision of my thinking, now at last undertaken.

I must also express my deep gratitude to the editors of this *Challenges* series, Gareth Jones and Lewis Ayres, whose patience with me has been nothing short of heroic; and to the many editors and sub-editors at Wiley-Blackwell over the years who have guided this project to completion, in particular: Rebecca Harkin, Juliet Booker, Clelia Petracca, Laura (Adsett) Matthews, Ed Robinson, Martin Tribe and Madhurima Thapa.

Without the support that my own erstwhile university institutions (Harvard, Cambridge) have provided over the last years, and, more particularly, the generous grants, sabbatical time, and financial backing which have been garnered from the Leverhulme and McDonald Foundations of late, probably even now this book would have not have come to completion. All these forms of generosity and trust remind us that gift and sacrifice are not opposites (as is also discussed in this volume), but coterminous and cooperative undertakings only fully comprehensible in the economy of grace.

Sarah Coakley
Alexandria, VA
Candlemas, 2024

Acknowledgements

With the exception of the ‘Prologue’ and Chapter 10 (‘Sacrifice Re-visited: Blood and Gender’), all the essays in this volume have appeared in earlier settings, but have been included here with either light or more significant revisions. Where the copyright lies with the earlier publisher, I am grateful for permission to reproduce the material. The details of these earlier publications are as follows:

‘The Identity of the Risen Jesus: Finding Jesus Christ in the Poor’, in eds. Beverly Roberts Gaventa and Richard B. Hays, *Seeking the Identity of Jesus: A Pilgrimage* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 301–319. Reprinted by permission of the publisher.

‘Does Kenōsis Rest on a Mistake? Three Kenotic Models in Patristic Exegesis’, in ed C. Stephen Evans, *Exploring Kenotic Christology: The Self-Emptying God* (Oxford: O.U.P., 2006), 246–264. Reproduced with permission of the Licensor through PLSclear.

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‘Re-Thinking Jewish/Christian Divergence on the “Image of the Divine”: the Problem of Intra-Divine Complexity and the Origins of the Doctrine of the Trinity’, in eds. Michael Welker and William Schweiker, *Images of the Divine and Cultural Orientations: Jewish, Christian and Islamic Voices* (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2015), 133–149. Reproduced by kind permission of Michael Welker.

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“‘*In Persona Christi*’: Who, or Where, is Christ at the Altar?’, in *A Man of Many Parts: Essays in Honor of John Westerdale Bowker on the Occasion of His Eightieth Birthday*, ed. Eugene E. Lemcio with an Introduction by Rowan Williams (Eugene OR: Pickwick Publications, 2015), 95–112. Reproduced by permission of Wipf and Stock Publishers.

‘The Woman at the Altar: Cosmological Disturbance or Gender Fluidity?’, *The Anglican Theological Review* 86 (2004), 75–93 (a small section of this article appears in Chapter 9: permission granted by the Executive Director and Managing Editor, *The Anglican Theological Review*).

‘Why Gift? Gift, Gender, and Trinitarian Relations in Milbank and Tanner’, *Scottish Journal of Theology* 16 (2008), 224–235. © 2008 *Scottish Journal of Theology*. Reprinted with permission.

‘Transubstantiation and its Contemporary Renditions: Returning Eucharistic Presence to the Body, Gender, and Affect’, in “Yes, Well . . .” *Exploring the Past, Present and Future of the Church: Essays in Honor of John W. Coakley*, ed. James Hart Brumm (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformed Church Press [Eerdmans], 2016), 61–81. *Reformed Church Press*, 475 Riverside Drive, New York, NY 10115, USA. All rights reserved. Reproduced with permission.

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Figure 8.1: Rembrandt van Rijn, 'The Sacrifice of Abraham', 1655, etching. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam. Reproduced with permission.

Figure 8.2: Rembrandt van Rijn, 'The Sacrifice of Isaac', 1635, oil painting. The State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg. Reproduced with permission. Photograph by Vladimir Terebenin, © The State Hermitage Museum.

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Figure 10.1: Unknown northwest German Master, 'Eucharistic Man of Sorrows with the Allegorical Figure of *Caritas*', c. 1470. Wallfahr-Richartz-Museum & Fondation Corboud. Reproduced by permission. Photograph © Rheinisches Bildarchiv Köln, rba_c010594.

Figure 10.2: Giovanna Bellini, 'Pietà Donà delle Rose', c. 1505, Galleria dell'Accademia, Venice. Photograph © Getty Images, reproduced with permission.

Figure 10.3: Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres, 'Madonna and the Consecrated Wafer', 1865, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. In the public domain.

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Prologue: The Broken Body

This book is concerned with how and where Christians *encounter* Jesus Christ and acknowledge his identity, in all its mystery and fulness. It also asks, secondly, how believers can, or should, then best *express* what they believe about him. And finally, and thirdly, it begins to probe how that expression is bound up with what they necessarily *do* to live out that belief and embrace its demands, not only through Christian sacramental and ecclesial practices, but also on the borderlands of the church, and especially in the historic and fraught relationship of Christianity to Judaism. For it is thus, I propose, that they come to ‘know’ Christ ‘more nearly’, both through habituation and continual surprise.

These three tasks constitute, as I see it, the fundamental concerns of any attempt at a ‘Christology’ – that is, any adequate expression of the contours of belief in Christ as the salvific God/Man. But beyond and beneath these initial concerns, and perhaps more challengingly, this book asks in various ways what initial human presumptions or attitudes have to be *broken* in order for any proper response to emerge to these core riddles of Christian faith in relating to Jesus Christ. That issue is my central concern in what follows immediately in this Prologue. The lines of thought about such ‘brokenness’ may, perforce, not be immediately familiar ones, and certainly they are ones which in some cases could court controversy and critique; and hence the need to explain them anticipatorily. But as I shall argue here, they are vital for any rich and discerning understanding of the christological task.

I should also immediately make it clear at the outset, moreover, that this is therefore a book of essays that should be read as *prolegomena* to any future Christology, rather than as a full and substantial

Christology *per se*.¹ That is, I am engaged in this book in preliminary explorations,² which will shape what I finally wish to say about Christ as the fulsome revelatory divine presence in any ‘systematic’ theology worthy of the name. But these preliminary explorations are necessary steps, because none of them is completely obvious in the current theological terrain, and several of them may even seem surprising or contentious. Let me now explain.

The Christological Question

‘Who is Christ?’ This is a deceptively simple question, and it hides a multitude of possible theoretic ‘sins’ and differences of opinion only scarcely below the surface of immediate theological consciousness. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, one of the most perspicacious commentators on this topic in the modern period, left only lecture notes on the problem (‘the christological question’, as he himself called it);³ but he was one of the few theologians in the twentieth century to have pinpointed with such insight its real richness and its accompanying difficulties. It is not for nothing that his analysis starts with the insistence that ‘silence’ should precede any attempt to answer this question – since Christ, he says, is essentially inexpressible, whilst at the same time supremely revelatory: thus, ‘The silence of the Church is silence before the Word’.⁴ A true Lutheran, however, Bonhoeffer goes on immediately to fulminate – contentiously, of course – against the suggestion that this silence might be the silence of what he calls the ‘mystics’; for he takes it that *their* ‘dumbness’ would be both solitary and self-referential. Instead, he says, an essential paradox has to be grasped at the outset of the christological task: ‘To speak of Christ means

¹ My hope is to supply that fuller account in the fourth and last volume of my ongoing ‘systematic theology’, as prospectively outlined in my *God, Sexuality and the Self: An Essay ‘On the Trinity’* (Cambridge: C.U.P., 2013), at p. xv. I explain there why my Christology is left until last in the systematics, not as ‘demotion’ but as ‘climax’.

² This book thus performs a similar function in my writing to that of an earlier volume in this *Challenges* series (*Powers and Submissions: Spirituality, Philosophy and Gender* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002)), whose contents acted as anticipatory goods, intimations and footnotes to the arguments of the unfolding ‘systematic theology’, especially to volume 1, *God, Sexuality and the Self*.

³ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Christ The Center*, tr. Edwin H. Robertson (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1978).

⁴ *Ibid.*, 27.

to keep silent; to keep silent about Christ means to speak. When the Church speaks rightly out of a *proper silence*, then Christ is proclaimed'.⁵

Ironically, however, the 'mystic' in the Western tradition who most closely anticipated this paradoxical insight of the Lutheran Bonhoeffer about a 'proper silence' before Christ was the sixteenth century Carmelite friar, John of the Cross, only a slightly later contemporary of Luther himself. As John wrote in one of his most famous aphorisms: 'The Father spoke one Word, which was his Son, and this Word he speaks always in eternal silence, and in silence it must be heard by the soul'.⁶

The essays that follow in this book cannot therefore be said to be straightforwardly 'Bonhoefferian', for – amongst other differences from him – they engage insistently with earlier traditions of 'mystical theology' (patristic and medieval) towards which Bonhoeffer harboured a certain suspicion, and which find a certain climax in John of the Cross himself. But what they do share with Bonhoeffer is an intense interest in *analyzing* what can, and cannot, be said in the task of Christology (out of a 'proper silence'), and what therefore remains the necessary arena of divine revelatory mystery, indeed the unfinished business – at least from our human perspective – in any authentically Spirit-filled response to the crucified and resurrected Jesus. And what goes along with this insight is an attempt to clarify first and afresh, as Bonhoeffer also did so presciently and in his own way, what must thereby be the *relationship* between certain primary elements in any modern christological armoury: the 'Christ' as biblically proclaimed in the New Testament; the 'historical Jesus' as earnestly probed behind the biblical texts by modern critical scholarship; and the patristic tradition of metaphysical speculation as to Christ's 'person' and 'natures'.

Understanding how these three different genres of reflection on Christ relate, or should relate, in our quest for Christ's 'identity' is one of the most complex and subtle questions of contemporary

⁵ Ibid., my emphasis.

⁶ John of the Cross, 'Sayings of Light and Love', 100, in tr. Kieran Kavanaugh, O.C.D. and Otilio Rodriguez, O.C.D., *The Collected Works of John of the Cross* (Washington, DC: Institute of Carmelite Studies, 1991), 92. Rowan Williams, in *The Wound of Knowledge: Christian Spirituality from the New Testament to St John of the Cross* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1979), chs. 7, 8 (on Luther and John of the Cross, to be read in tandem), throws considerable light both on the contiguity and congruence of Luther's and John of the Cross's views on 'proper silence', but also on Luther's (as also Bonhoeffer's) resistance to 'mystical' individualism, in favour instead of the *Deus absconditus* of the cross.

Christology: it is, after all, a special conundrum created by the modern period in its forging of a newly intense appeal to the second element in this triad.⁷ I choose to tackle this issue head-on in the opening chapter of this book. Immediately, and out of this initial reflection, an argument of my own starts to emerge about how any proper response to the identity and presence of the risen Christ is *necessarily* ‘apophatic’ in a particular sense, that is, ‘broken open’ to the unexpected and the mysterious in the Spirit’s brokerage of a form of displacement from our natural expectations and categories.⁸ We would – reasonably enough, or so it seems – like to catch and hold what *we* might know and recognize in Christ, to make it our own possession, even express it in purely propositional terms; and the modern ‘quest’ for Jesus as an

⁷ I draw attention here to John Webster’s insightful comment that Christology in the modern period has seen overall a certain withdrawal from speculative reflection on the ‘ontological’ Christ, and a correlative and compensatory obsession with the ‘economic’ Christ (especially as grasped through historical study): see his ‘The Place of Christology in Systematic Theology’, in ed. Francesca Aran Murphy, *The Oxford Handbook of Christology* (Oxford: O.U.P., 2015), ch. 39, esp. 615–617, 619, 621–625. It will be clear in what follows in this Prologue that I resist this modern disjunction and seek to repair it.

⁸ ‘Apophasis’ technically means ‘saying no’, or ‘unsaying’; but in the context of its classic theological application (e.g., in the influential work of the late-fifth century Dionysius the Areopagite) it does not simply or straightforwardly mean propositional ‘denial’, let alone an absolute *nescience* about the divine, since the project is undergirded by a progressive contemplative *journey* into the life of God, which is revelatory and participatory in nature. (For a succinct definitional discussion of the meanings of the disputed terms ‘mystical theology’, ‘apophaticism’ and ‘negative theology’, see my earlier essay, ‘Dark Contemplation and Epistemic Transformation’, in eds. Oliver D. Crisp and Michael C. Rea, *Analytic Theology: New Essays in the Philosophy of Religion* (Oxford: O.U.P., 2009), ch. 14, esp. 280–281.) When fulsome revelation and divine mystery are rightly held together in *Christology*, as I shall argue in this volume, ‘apophasis’ will involve both a set of strategies for speaking about God-in-Christ to protect that unique combination of factors (and to ward off idolatrous misconstructions), and also a number of attendant spiritual practices that inculcate an openness to the *Spirit’s* drawing us into the expanding orbit of Christ’s truth from which these very insights can be attained (see 1 Cor 12. 3: ‘No one can [even] say “Jesus is Lord” except by the Holy Spirit’). It follows that ‘apophaticism’, Christology and pneumatology are tightly woven together in the argument I develop through this book, and which is distinctive of it. For a survey of some other renditions of ‘apophatic Christology’ (a relative neologism) which have appeared of late, see Philip McCosker, ‘Sitit Sitiri: Apophatic Christologies of Desire’, in eds. Eric Bugyis and David Newheiser, *Desire, Faith, and the Darkness of God: Essays in Honor of Denys Turner* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2015), 391–413.

object of critical historical investigation inevitably courted, from the start, this ambition to probe to a new level of certainty about what could be verified about his life, teaching and person, as if the mystery that inevitably surrounds God in Godself could somehow be dispelled or moderated in the case of his Son. For often we still presume that getting at the ‘historical’, or ‘human’, Jesus will be the proper means of taking hold of what *we* need to know in responding to a more elusive divine revelation.⁹

Worse: the ambition may even be extended to a felt need to *justify*, by historical and empirical means, the very metaphysical claims enshrined in later credal statements about the second Person of the Trinity. But this, I submit, is a vain and misplaced propulsion – a ‘category mistake’ – as is argued at some length in Chapter 1. Attempting to map the modern ‘historical Jesus’ directly onto the historic creeds in this way is fraught with confusion,¹⁰ not least because it also sometimes attempts to short-circuit, and even displace, the issue of what it is to encounter the *risen* Jesus – without which the question of the ‘identity’ of Christ is idolatrously shrunk from the outset, and the historic creeds denuded of all their soteriological power.

⁹ But this represents a dismaying rendition of John 1. 18 (‘No one has ever seen God; the only Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known’), since according to the distinctive Johannine theology – which has no inkling, of course, of the modern ‘quest for the historical Jesus’ – the ‘making known’ of God by the Logos requires a ‘believing *into*’ the risen Son which is by no means obvious to a dispassionate observer, let alone lacking in any richness of divine mystery. Yet it is the Son who has made himself *seen* in incarnational space/time, as is insisted here. With this text compare also 1 John 4. 12 (‘No one has ever seen God; [but] if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us’), a reflection which clearly insists also on certain moral or spiritual preconditions for the appropriate fiduciary response to the divine presence in Christ.

¹⁰ I explain in Chapter 1 that the term ‘the historical Jesus’ is also unfortunately ambiguous; for it may connote, on the one hand, the human, incarnated, Jesus during his life on earth (‘the earthly Jesus’), or, rather differently, the modern attempt to probe and circumscribe this reality via historical-critical means (‘the historian’s Jesus’). It is the attempt to justify credal claims about the Son of God on the basis of the *latter* that leads to this confusion, both philosophical and theological, since, at best, the ‘historian’s Jesus’ could only display or suggest aspects of his remarkable humanity, not definitively establish him as ‘God’. Not that many modern and contemporary theologians do not continue to harbour this essentially empiricist ambition: Joachim Jeremias in Germany, for instance, who was reacting to Bultmann’s very different, ‘kerygmatic’, christological approach; and a line of illustrious British New Testament scholars in the tradition of C.H. Dodd, most especially, in this generation, N.T. Wright.

It follows, as I go on to argue further in Chapter 1, that although the modern ‘historian’s Jesus’ inevitably and rightly retains enormous and enticing interest for all Christians who seek to deepen their understanding of the identity of Christ in his historical manifestation (even though this quest remains fraught with endless scholarly disagreements of interpretation), it cannot be either the justificatory starting point, nor the constraining and final criterion, for his divine reality: this is one of the most significant areas in which an apophatic ‘saying no’ has to occur in Christology. Yet, in a slightly different sense of ‘saying no’, this ‘historian’s Jesus’ can indeed have a crucial role, as I also argue in Chapter 1, in being deployed strategically *against* ideological, distorted or idolatrous renditions of that same Jesus. In other words, we must say ‘no’ to attempts to defuse or ignore his risen mystery, just as we also say ‘no’ to attempts to hijack his risen reality for falsely political, distorting, or even merely complacent ecclesiastical ends.

It is thus not coincidental that Bonhoeffer was the modern theologian so particularly concerned to locate the (to him, judiciously circumscribed¹¹) importance of the ‘historian’s Jesus’, at the same time as he also cautioned against the dangers of an idolatrous rendition of the same project: his own political and social context, we can now see more clearly, was quite crucial here for his perspective and insight.¹² Writing with his ‘back up against the wall’ (as another great christologist of the late modern period would later call it¹³), Bonhoeffer the Lutheran was

¹¹ In fact, Bonhoeffer rather intriguingly insists that a ‘historical Jesus’ focus in Christology can easily lead also to a modern form of docetism, where Jesus’s ideas become disconnected from his ‘person’: see *Christ the Center*, 80–82. For Bonhoeffer’s stress, in contrast, on the need for a ‘critical’ or ‘negative’ Christology, see *ibid.*, 74–75, 100–102.

¹² From a sociological perspective we might therefore characterize Bonhoeffer’s Christology as a strident critique of a ‘Church-type’ (state-mandated) Lutheranism in political collusion with Nazism. For more on social ‘typologies’ and their relation to Christian doctrine in general, and Christology in particular, see n. 14, below.

¹³ Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited* (New York: Abingdon, 1949) represents one of the most significant christological works from an Afro-American theologian in the ‘Jim Crow’ era, and one that used then-current historical-Jesus research (especially on Jesus in his Jewish context) precisely to *resist* a complacent racist christological idolatry. The book memorably begins: ‘Many and varied are the interpretations dealing with the teachings and the life of Jesus of Nazareth. But few of these interpretations deal with what the teachings and the life of Jesus have to say to those who stand, at a moment in human history, with their backs against the wall’ (*ibid.*, 11).

teaching for a state-church that was at this very time in danger of completely idolatrous corruption by Nazi ideology; and thus he was necessarily expressing his own theological, indeed specifically *christological*, resistance. His 'saying no' was therefore not merely an attention to an appropriate set of semantic rules for Christology, but a lived-out practice of spiritual and political protest. And this was in relation to the very Christ whose Word was speaking to him afresh out of the primordial divine silence to which his teaching and preaching witnessed.

Thus, once the necessary *simultaneity* of dazzling revelation and dark hiddenness in our response to the risen Christ is better understood, we also begin to see that even to restrict our christological reflections to the three sources of reflection already mentioned (the 'biblical Christ', the 'historian's Jesus', and the Christ of conciliar definitions) is itself too constrained an understanding of the christological undertaking and its necessary points of reference; we must attend also and always to the social *context* of our christological utterances,¹⁴ but also at the same time to the sometimes-shattering pervasiveness of the presence of Christ in our midst, at least for those attuned to receive it: for 'Christ plays in ten thousand places', as Gerard Manley Hopkins once expressed this mystery poetically.¹⁵ I go on therefore towards the

¹⁴ It was Ernst Troeltsch (1865–1923) who prophetically demonstrated the crucial conditioning dimension of social context for any doctrinal utterance, a thesis expounded especially clearly at the end of his great study of the history of Christian social teachings: tr. Olive Wyon, *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches* (orig., 1912; London: Allen and Unwin, 1931), see esp. 994–997 ('Christian Thought Dependent on Social Factors'). By clarifying how christological proposals, too, would always correlate to some extent with 'types' of social relationship ('Church', 'Sect' and 'Mystic'), Troeltsch was able to indicate, albeit far too briefly in this particular work, the social and political 'patterning's' of different kinds of Christology, and their religious significance. Troeltsch's work, I believe, lies influentially, if mutely, in the background of Bonhoeffer's christological insights, especially in his stress on 'negative' Christology as a form of ('sectarian') resistance. For comments on the ongoing significance for Christology of Troeltsch's sociological analyses, see my own early monograph, *Christ Without Absolutes: A Study of the Christology of Ernest Troeltsch* (Oxford: O.U.P., 1988), esp. 191–197.

¹⁵ See Gerard Manley Hopkins, 'As Kingfishers Catch Fire', which ends:
 '... for Christ plays in ten thousand places,
 Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his
 To the Father through the features of men's faces'.

end of Chapter 1 to unfurl an appeal to the patristic tradition of 'spiritual sensation' to account for the epistemological conditions under which the Spirit can indeed 'break open' our hearts and minds to the pervasive and transforming reality of Christ's risen presence in these 'ten thousand places': in Word, in sacrament, in the 'body of Christ' which is the church, but especially too in moral acts of mercy and compassion to the oppressed and the poor.

But what exactly, then, does this 'breaking open' to the full reality of Christ, as so far discussed, actually connote? Is there not a danger here of mere obfuscation on the one hand (the apophatic 'darkness' motif as merely blinding, élitist or confusing, as some might cynically interpret it), or, on the other, of the naïve valorization of multiple experiential agendas, under the false aegis of 'mystical' appeals to the presence of Christ? The answer, of course, is that both these spiritual dangers are always and ever on offer (we can never dispel them completely, and that is why spiritual discernment in this area is so important). But that does not mean that we cannot do sterling work in continuing to probe and clarify the epistemological, semantic, metaphysical, and moral questions which this christological arena holds up to us. And the rest of this Prologue will now be devoted to this task.

How to *Speak* of Christ: The Positive and the Negative Poles

So far we have discussed a 'breaking open' of consciousness to the risen Christ which is the creative starting point of any deep reflection on his personal identity, brokered in the Spirit. This is a theological point of essentially *epistemological* (and thus also wider 'spiritual') significance. But this lesson has immediate consequences, as already hinted, for a different, this time *semantic*, sense of 'apophaticism' as applied to all our faltering attempts to describe, define, or comprehend through any kind of linguistic expression, what Christ *is* 'for us'. In Chapter 4 of this book I make an attempt to unravel this issue in specific reference to the so-called 'Chalcedonian Definition', the document propounded by a decree of the church in the mid-fifth century (451 CE) to provide a conciliar norm for any future christological 'orthodoxy'. The immediate political fall-out from this attempt is

well-known,¹⁶ and was profoundly messy and divisive ecclesiastically; but what is less agreed upon, even now, is quite what the ‘Definition’ was actually attempting to achieve in the first place, and what it therefore should connote now for the Christian faithful. The answer I supply in Chapter 4 is my own response to the question of the spiritual importance of understanding what can, and cannot, be grasped about the reality of Christ in such (rightly)-attempted credal protections against heresy.

This task involves pinpointing another form of ‘saying no’, in the sense of *linguistically* protecting a unique mystery whilst also ‘breaking open’ consciousness to further horizons of christological possibility. The word ‘horizon’ (as opposed to ‘definition’), is in fact a less misleading translation of the original Greek term used for this text (*horos*). What it is attempting to do, therefore, as I argue in some detail in Chapter 4, is to indicate the boundaries of what can, and what cannot, be constrained or explained in any formal attempt such as this to protect the unique metaphysical mystery of the God/Man; and at the same time it gestures invitingly beyond the edges of what *can* be said into an encounter with the divine reality itself, displayed incarnationally in Christ. By the same token (utilizing a combination of the ‘positive’ and the ‘negative’ modes, linguistically understood), it also deliberately uses key technical terms (*hypostasis*, *phusis*) that are themselves, in a sense, intentionally ‘apophatic’ in their minimalism. One can, of course, attempt some basic indication, in explicating the meaning of the ‘Definition’, of what Christ’s ‘person’ (*hypostasis*) and ‘natures’ (*phuseis*) denote here, and even – provisionally – how they might be related; but at the time of the writing of the ‘Definition’ the deeper philosophical aspects of these questions were by no means

¹⁶ Classic historical textbooks such as Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition*, vol. 1, *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100–600)* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), ch. 5, and vol. 2, *The Spirit of Eastern Christendom (600–1700)* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), ch. 2, remain a helpful starting point in charting these lasting and significant reactions to the Chalcedonian ‘Definition’, and their historic ecclesiastical outcomes. A much more recent, succinct, account of the same resistances and reactions to Chalcedon (which also draws on the work of Alois Grillmeier) may be found in Andrew Louth, ‘Christology in the East from the Council of Chalcedon to John Damascene’, in ed. Murphy, *The Oxford Handbook of Christology*, ch. 9, esp. 139–148.

fully plumbed, and the use of these key terms was therefore seemingly intended more as a wedge against various forms of error than as a full clarification. However, we should not mistake *this* ‘apophatic’ strategy (as some moderns influentially have done, under one form of an appeal to Wittgenstein’s later philosophy), as merely the creation of linguistic ‘rules’ in quest of a form of semantic hygiene, as if strong metaphysical assertions were not also being made quite emphatically.¹⁷ This latter presumption, I argue, presents a false disjunction; for we should neither mistake the Chalcedonian ‘Definition’ for a full propositional explication of the riches of Christ’s reality, nor yet for any withdrawal from a profound underlying metaphysical confidence about the irreducible uniqueness of the incarnation itself. Both these aspects of the christological task are fully compatible under a suitably ‘apophatic’ rendition.

When we then turn back to some of the pre-Chalcedonian christologians with such lessons in mind, it may be a surprise to find that we can now read at least some of them more charitably than heretofore – less as false approximations to a later, ‘achieved’, conciliar truth, and more as subtle explorations of the relation between given biblical authority, tentative philosophical explication, and necessary divine mystery. I discuss these matters in Chapters 2 and 3 of this volume in relation to two central themes in the Christology of Gregory of Nyssa (c.335–c.395), expositions which I believe to have been gravely misunderstood and misjudged by many in the tradition – at least until recently.¹⁸

To be sure, Nyssen’s christological writings are *ad hoc* and unsystematic; we cannot claim that they represent a finished product, and

¹⁷ I contest certain dimensions of Richard A. Norris’s influential rendition of Chalcedon along these lines in ch. 4, *intra*. More recently I have been somewhat bemused to find that Bruce Lindley McCormack’s reading of me on this point (in *The Humility of the Eternal Son: Reformed Kenoticism and the Repair of Chalcedon* (Cambridge: C.U.P., 2021), 28, n. 4), merely conflates my view with that of Norris, missing the point that I myself continue to insist on the core *metaphysical* assertions made by Chalcedon.

¹⁸ The work of Brian E. Daley, S.J., and of John Behr in the Anglophone literature (as I discuss in chs. 2 and 3, *intra*), already marked an important turning point in the assessments of Nyssen’s christological writings; but arguably there still remains much more work to be done.

the full coherence of what he proposes is often – at least at first blush – elusive and unresolved. But what emerges from a closer examination of his treatment of the two controversial christological themes that I examine here (‘Kenosis’ in ch. 2, and ‘Mingling’ in ch. 3), is a pattern of christological thinking which further amplifies our understanding of Christology as a ‘breaking open’ of ‘apophatic’ consciousness. We should not of course be surprised to find Gregory excelling in this genre, given his foundational contribution to the resolution of the later Arian controversy, and his particularly novel and perspicacious account of the paradoxical relation of trinitarian and ‘apophatic’ thinking therein.¹⁹ But perhaps what is less well understood is how this same sensibility is present also in his christological treatises. What we see here, I propose, is an implicit christological ‘method’ (worthy of further reflection and analysis), in which a richly ‘semiotic’²⁰

¹⁹ Two contrasting, but equally influential, accounts of Gregory of Nyssa’s ‘apophaticism’ may be found in Jean Daniélou, *Platonisme et théologie mystique: Essai sur la doctrine spirituelle de saint Grégoire de Nyse* (rev. ed., Paris: Aubier, 1953), and Ekkehard Mühlberg, *Die Unendlichkeit Gottes bei Gregor von Nyssa: Gregors Kritik am Gottesbegriff der klassischen Metaphysik* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1966). The resolution of their differences is key to understanding the complexity of Nyssen’s position. A more recent study of Gregory’s trinitarian theology in the light of his ‘apophaticism’ illuminatingly utilizes contemporary linguistic theory to attempt to explain it afresh: Scot R. Douglass, *Theology of the Gap: Cappadocian Language Theory and the Trinitarian Controversy* (New York: Peter Lang, 2005). But amongst the most important current attempts to explicate the relation of Nyssen’s ‘apophatic’ thinking to his particular contributions to trinitarian thought are: Lewis Ayres, ‘On Not Three People’, in ed. Sarah Coakley, *Re-Thinking Gregory of Nyssa* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), 15–44 (see also *ibid.*, *Nicaea and Its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology* (Oxford: O.U.P., 2004), ch. 14); and Giulio Maspero, *Trinity and Man: Gregory of Nyssa’s Ad Ablabium* (Leiden: Brill, 2007).

²⁰ I use the term ‘semiotic’ here with the intentional overtones of Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, especially as expounded by the French feminist Julia Kristeva (who is discussed especially in ch. 10 of this volume). With these authors the term relates to the pre-linguistic realm of the child’s identification with the maternal, and is contrasted with the so-called ‘masculine’ ‘symbolic’ arena – of language, distinction, and clarification. Here, by extension, I intend ‘semiotic’ to connote a means of reasoning that draws richly on the unconscious and on multiple narratives and symbols, without necessarily seeking a definitive propositional conclusion to a developed line of argument.

approach to a variety of relevant biblical texts, symbols and metaphors, which mutually bombard and co-inform one another, is conjoined with an equally rich exploration of pagan philosophical materials of relevance which might supply analytic clarification of the matter in hand. In applying these insights doctrinally, however, the existing philosophical tropes are never allowed by Nyssen simply to control or dominate without some correction, but are brought into new alliance and counterpoint with the vying biblical materials, and in interaction with the undergirding spiritual practice of the theological investigator. Such is the locus, according to Gregory, of a suitably 'apophatic' rendition of christological revelation.²¹ In large part, I argue at the end of these chapters, Gregory thereby anticipates the insights of the slightly-later 'mystical' theologian, Dionysius the Areopagite, for whom appropriate theological utterance is always a matter of 'saying yes', 'saying no', and then saying 'no' even to the 'no'.²² For only thus does one advance on a three-tiered *journey* into God which is not simply a matter of a discerningly 'apophatic' semantic theory (important as that is), but more fundamentally of an extended religious epistemology of personal transformation and insight. The ultimate goal is a *participation* in God, not simply the production of an exacting

²¹ It is true that Nyssen falls foul of certain Chalcedonian 'rules' retrospectively – at least when his theme of 'mingling' is unsympathetically understood as a 'confusion' of the two natures. But as I shall show in chs. 2 and 3, *intra*, his unique construal of the ecstatic divine 'outpouring' of Phil 2, combined with his understanding of that divine gift for the progressive purification of the human passions in the life of Christ, allows for a narrative understanding of Christ's *human* growth-in-God that is wholly congruent with a modern rendition of the significance of the 'historical Jesus' (*qua* human life of Jesus: 'the earthly Jesus'). It is thus able to confront the challenges that the much later modern 'kenoticists' were concerned with, but without 'trimming' any divine attributes away, however temporarily. Moreover, his concomitant rendition of the 'mingling' of the divinity and humanity of Christ, when sympathetically read and understood, does not obliterate the human but salvifically suffuses it with divine potency.

²² See Dionysius the Areopagite, 'Mystical Theology', in tr. Colm Luibheid, *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works* (London: S.P.C.K., 1987), 133–141. (This modern translation is not without its problems, but the core point about the three stages of ascent is made clearly at *ibid.*, 136, 138–140.)

linguistic account of what can, and cannot, be said propositionally about God and the God/Man who is Christ.

Christology and Judaism: What is at Stake?

Up to now I have made no direct mention of the major christological complications raised by the indissoluble – but historically heinous and tragic – relation of Christianity to Judaism, although this theme has necessarily lurked in our earlier discussion of ‘the historical Jesus’ (Jesus the Jew). In one sense, of course, this christological ‘complication’ and its core attendant question is obvious: is Jesus the long-expected Jewish ‘Messiah’, or is he not? And is *any* Christian doctrine of Christ therefore necessarily ‘supersessionist’, or is it not? Much depends here, as we shall see, on the very definition (and remaining ambiguity) of the term ‘supersessionism’.²³ The second section of this volume is devoted to a set of complex hermeneutical explorations which aim to ‘break open’ this issue afresh – in a yet further sense of that metaphor of ‘breaking’ already explored; and it argues, cumulatively, through these several essays, that no Christology worthy of the name can duck or evade the matter of Christianity’s historic, and ongoing, relation to Israel. Whatever it is that Christians want to say of Christ must therefore be integrally connected to his, and Christianity’s, rootedness in Hebrew Scripture and tradition: the theme of ultimate

²³ I tackle this problem in detail in ch. 5, *intra*. I argue there that even when the anti-Jewish, exclusivist, form of ‘supersessionism’ (in which Christianity displaces and rejects Judaism) is replaced with a ‘one covenant’ view in which Jesus simply fulfils Jewish Messianic expectations, there still remains the problem of the core Christian claim about Jesus precisely *as Messiah*. I am therefore critical of various ‘liberal’ attempts to defuse this latter ‘scandalon’ of Christian Christology completely; and I propose an alternative focussed on the Christian doctrine of the Trinity in which the preliminary ‘offence’ is acknowledged, but the future is kept open to an eschatological convergence, precisely through the Spirit. We should note too that this whole ‘supersessionist’ problem looks different in the light of a classic patristic/scholastic view of time as participation in divine *eternity*, rather than in a linear trajectory of one religious tradition superseding another *after* it: for astute comments on this point, see Matthew Levering, *Sacrifice and Community: Jewish Offering and Christian Eucharist* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 5–7.

eschatological re-convergence between Judaism and Christianity, unforgettably bequeathed to us by the apostle Paul in Romans 9–11, thus remains as fresh as ever, and necessarily as yet unfinished.²⁴

My method, in the four chapters that follow in Part II of this volume, is exploratory and preliminary in relation to this key topic, and by the same token it is also essentially exegetical: I do not attempt here to settle this issue in some more ambitious, analytic, or philosophical mode.²⁵ And that is entirely advised. Taking four core themes that are normally associated with ‘breaking’ Judaism and Christianity *apart* (in a negative or exclusionary sense of Christian ‘supersessionism’), what is discovered in all four cases is actually an extraordinary hidden nexus of ongoing *shared* theological insight, arguably the harbinger of a deeper unity that is still being worked out through and between the

²⁴ There have of course been many other attempts at this task of *rapprochement*, post-World War II, chief among them being the enormously creative, albeit internally divergent, works of New Testament scholars engaged in the ‘New Perspective on Paul’ project. In the arena of scholastic thought on Jewish tradition, I have found Matthew Levering’s *Christ’s Fulfillment of Torah and Temple: Salvation according to Thomas Aquinas* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2002), particularly illuminating and suggestive. In the realm of modern systematic theology, I have been influenced by those who have both followed, and also critiqued, Karl Barth’s paradoxical understanding of Israel’s ‘election *for rejection*’ (see Katherine Sonderegger, *That Jesus Christ was Born a Jew: Karl Barth’s Doctrine of Israel* (College Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992), 173, my emphasis); by the extensive work of Paul M. van Buren (see n. 28, below); and more recently by the excellent collection of essays from both Jewish and Christian authors in ed. George Hunsinger, *Karl Barth, the Jews and Judaism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2018). To the extent that my own method in this volume witnesses to any originality in this realm of Jewish/Christian understanding, it is by assuming that deep scriptural attention and prayerfulness, along with a willingness to follow the ‘golden string’ of traditions to their more esoteric and ‘mystical’ ends, is one, indeed one profound, way to keep the conversation between traditions in creative play, ‘up to the end’.

²⁵ I must acknowledge once more (see too the Preface) how these reflections originally arose from shared Jewish/Christian textual explorations (in *havruta* groups in Israel, and elsewhere). This shared practice, inspired by rabbinical method, involves a discipline of ‘staying with the texts’ and their receptions – in this case in both traditions – an undertaking that occasions endless surprises and dislocations, ones which I myself would often attribute to the ‘interruption’ of the Spirit in shared prayer and worship.