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Foreword

Faith and reason, wrote Pope John Paul II, are the two wings the human spirit uses to reach truth. The dialogue between faith and reason is a constant in human conversation, with faith using reason to understand more adequately faith’s own truths, and reason using faith to understand better reason’s own nature and that of its findings.

This centuries-old conversation, characterized in Patristic literature as a dialogue between Jerusalem and Athens, finds new expression in Fr. Robert Barron’s highly significant work. The dialogue takes on new importance today because some believers reject any rational critique of their faith, and some rationalists imagine the possibility of a purely secular reason. The danger in such positions is that faith without critique has too often legitimated violence, and reason divorced from faith has constructed utopian or “scientific” experiments that kill the human spirit along with millions of human beings.

Father Barron’s work is theological, for his own reflection is shaped by the task the Church has given him to teach theology at Mundelein Seminary in the Archdiocese of Chicago. He situates the dialogue between faith and reason in the conversation between those who begin theologizing with the data of revelation, shaping human experience by its demands, and those who begin theologizing from a philosophical or anthropological base, fitting revelation into the contours of reason and human experience.

The Priority of Christ puts this ancient and contemporary dialogue to new music. Fr. Barron creates a “postliberal” theology that is neither a return to Scholasticism nor even to the Fathers, although he draws upon the resources of earlier theologians. His is a theology that reaches back for its sources and forward for its concerns. Precisely to move forward, Fr. Barron must disempower modernity’s critique of faith and modify...
the exaggerated claims advanced by historicity. The priority of Christ is ontological, epistemic and ethical; but the new melodies chanting who Christ is can’t be heard without first muting the tired songs derived from Cartesian subjectivism. The original sin of liberal Christianity is to reduce divine self-revelation to personal religious experience.

When I was a seminarian over four decades ago, an experienced spiritual director used to take my many concerns about the spiritual life and the life of faith and bring them to the light of Christ. He suggested to me a practice I’ve maintained over these many years. Each year, he advised, I should not just read theology or philosophy, but take and make my own at least one book on the life of Christ. He was concerned neither with the quest for the historical Jesus nor with having me answer naively what Jesus might do with my questions. He was insistent only that constantly living with the Lord creates a curiosity about him that cannot be satisfied by purely intellectual investigations. Jesus is not an idea but a person. In encountering him and surrendering to him, faith is born and reason challenged creatively.

This book gives analogous advice and insight to theologians today. Fr. Barron presents Jesus as an icon, beyond concept but not beyond rationality, a “super-saturated” phenomenon that is the central character in narratives that are always unique and never generic. Idols are manipulative expressions of our making; icons, by contrast, destroy special interests because they draw us into their world and prevent ours from becoming absolute. God is like a noisy shutter insistently banging in the night. We resist listening because we fear moving out of beds of our own making. Jesus, the revelation of God, tells us we have nothing to fear because God is not in competition with us. He is not a threat; he sets us free to think truthfully and to act rightly. God’s self-revelation is a natural complement to human reason, not its competitor; and God himself is “neither one being among many nor the sum total of creatures understood collectively.”

Fr. Barron explores the relations among metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics when each of these rational disciplines is enlightened by faith in Christ. A metaphysics of gift that elucidates creation as a unity of order traces the ontological relationships that enable creatures to participate in being and acting. An epistemology of co-inherence that studies the relation of subject and object in the act of knowing explains how love enters into knowing. An ethics elaborated in reference to iconic disciples of Christ respects individual distinctiveness while uniting every moral agent in the quest for holiness. None of Fr. Barron’s solutions will be the last word, but each resituates the conversation to get us talking among ourselves and with the Lord.

Will this book get a hearing? It enters the conversation today, but its arguments are of more than topical importance. For some, it may sound
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a discordant note; for others it will be like a shutter banging in the wind of grace, a call to intellectual and moral conversion. It is a hopeful work, designed to help the Church today work through many sterile debates and express the truths of the apostolic faith clearly and persuasively. Hope in Christ is consistent with a certain pessimism about a sinful world that rejects him and refuses to understand its own need for divine grace to set things right. Hope in Christ, nevertheless, knows that, in the end, all will be well because all is grace. Fr. Barron’s book is a gift, a grace, for us today.

Francis Cardinal George, OMI
To grasp this book, the reader has to understand that I came of age in the United States in the immediate wake of the Second Vatican Council. Though the conciliar texts themselves are rife with Scripture and deeply marked by the theological style of the church fathers, the implementation of the council, at least in America, was thoroughly grounded in the assumptions of liberalism. By this admittedly slippery term I mean, in the religious context, an approach that commences with experience and then reads doctrine in light of experience. As Karl Barth pointed out over a century ago, this method results in the positioning of revelation by something extrinsic to itself, a move repugnant to the logic implicit in the New Testament. The liberal method was practiced by some of the greatest theological masters of the last two hundred years, including Friedrich Schleiermacher, Ernst Troeltsch, Paul Tillich, Karl Rahner, and David Tracy, among many others. It resulted in a form of Christian theology easier for the contemporary mind to grasp but, precisely for that reason, one that was relatively bland, flattened out, and defanged.

What this looked like on the ground was what I’ve described as “beige Catholicism.” Jesus was presented rather consistently as one religious teacher among many, a deeply wise and holy man but not the Incarnate Word of God. The liturgy became a shared meal that embodied and celebrated the community rather than the act by which the Son, as head of his mystical body, worships the Father in the communion of the Holy Spirit. The missionary impulse faded away almost completely, since there was nothing really distinctive that Jesus added to the general religious sensibility. Eschatology more or less collapsed into the work of social justice here below. A new Marcionism took hold, as the significance of Jesus was parsed in abstraction from the Old Testament and the history...
of Israel. In a word, what made Christ distinctive, novel, surprising, and indispensable largely evanesced. As a result, the church sank into a kind of boredom, and boredom is never evangelically compelling.

Therefore, along with many others of my generation, I perceived the need to move beyond the regnant liberalism. I say “move beyond” rather than “repudiate,” for I appreciate very much certain achievements of liberalism, especially in the area of apologetics. For example, I still happily use Tillich, Rahner, and Schleiermacher when I want to draw toward the faith someone who has wandered into complete unbelief. Their methods can function, mutatis mutandis, as a sort of preambula fidei for our time. Nevertheless, a fresh approach was the needful thing. And it should start, I reckoned, not with experience but with Christ himself, with Jesus in all of his strangeness. From this unambiguously christological starting point, The Priority of Christ gets under way, moving subsequently through the doctrine of God, epistemology, and ethics. My intention was not so much to present a complete systematics but simply to show a way forward, to give at least a rough outline of what a thoroughly Christocentric theology would look like. And my fondest hope was to present a theology that was, unlike the tepid liberalism of the time, evangelically efficacious.

The Priority of Christ was published in 2007, and in 2008 I commenced the filming of my documentary series Catholicism. One of the principal inspirations for that film was Kenneth Clark's magnificent Civilisation from the 1970s, but an equally important motivation was to present at least some of the material in The Priority of Christ to a more general audience. Hence, the first episode of Catholicism deals with Jesus. It bears the title “Amazed and Afraid,” a phrase derived from the Gospel of Mark and designating the reaction of the disciples to the deeply troubling and unnerving figure whom they had elected to follow. The series then moves on to a consideration of God, the church, the sacraments, the last things, and the saints, those figures who most concretely embody the way of life opened up by Jesus. The saints profiled in the series—Katharine Drexel, Mother Teresa, Edith Stein, and Thérèse of Lisieux—are the same ones I covered in The Priority of Christ under the rubric of a new approach to ethics.

It is a source of great joy to me that Catholicism has been used very widely in the church and has brought many people to conversion and/or to a richer relationship with the Lord. The success of the series has proven to me that the approach adopted in The Priority of Christ does indeed have evangelical power. Though it is written in a highly academic manner, this book has—and I say it unapologetically—an evangelical purpose. It is meant not simply to illumine the mind or to clarify theological concepts or to settle scores in the academic area but rather to bring people to Jesus Christ.
Introduction

The Grandmother, the Misfit, and the One Who Throws Everything Off

Flannery O'Connor's short-story masterpiece “A Good Man Is Hard to Find” centers on a deadly duel between a superficially pious and self-regarding grandmother and the Misfit, a brutal killer and escaped convict. The grandmother’s fear of the Misfit is made clear in the first paragraph of the story. As her family prepares to set out on an automobile journey to Florida, she reminds them of the danger lurking on their route: “Here this fellow that calls himself The Misfit is aloose from the Federal Pen and headed toward Florida. . . . I wouldn’t take my children in any direction with a criminal like that aloose in it.”1 This statement signals the woman’s fear, but it also reveals her character. It is confirmed in the course of the story that she is rather bossy and self-righteous, typically chagrined that people around her don’t come up to her high moral expectations. Through a strange set of circumstances—narrated with O’Connor’s customary blend of irony and black humor—the Grandmother and her family do indeed come face to face with the Misfit. When the old lady blurts out, “You’re The Misfit! I recognized you at once!”2 the criminal becomes as frightened of her as she is of him, and the story moves quickly to a climax.

As his men lead the grandmother’s family one by one into the woods for execution, the Misfit and the old lady fall into a troubled theological

2. Ibid., 147.
conversation. “If you would pray,” said the grandmother, “Jesus would help you . . . why don’t you pray?”

The Misfit responds, “I don’t want no hep, I’m doing all right by myself.” What we learn through this simple exchange is that the Misfit and the woman are, despite their enormous superficial differences, in basically the same spiritual space, for each is convinced of his own self-sufficiency. As the shots coming from the woods confirm that her family is being killed, the grandmother begins to mutter, “Jesus, Jesus.” The Misfit takes the cue: “Yes’m. . . . Jesus thrown everything off balance . . . If he did what he said, then it’s nothing for you to do but throw away everything and follow him, and if he didn’t, then it’s nothing for you to do but enjoy the few minutes you got left the best way you can—by killing somebody or burning down his house or doing some other meanness to him. No pleasure but meanness.”

Though the old lady has invoked him in an act of desperate piety, it is clear that the Misfit possesses a more searching and theologically profound understanding of Jesus. Jesus, he knows, compels a choice, posing by his words and actions a Kierkegaardian either-or: either Jesus is everything or he is nothing; either you hand your entire life to him or you sink back into the vilest sort of selfishness. When in a sort of daze the grandmother says, “Maybe he didn’t raise the dead,” the Misfit frantically responds, “Listen lady, if I had of been there I would of known and I wouldn’t be like I am now.”

O’Connor commented that her stories center on “the offer of grace, usually refused”; this is one of those moments. Under the influence of the terrible acts that he is performing and his own powerful understanding of Jesus, something in the Misfit breaks open. The one who had, just moments before, declared his spiritual self-sufficiency now declares his need of grace. And in that same instant, something shifts in the grandmother: “She saw the man’s face twisted close to her own . . . and she murmured, ‘Why you’re one of my babies. You’re one of my own children!’” Having long feared the Misfit and having seen her very worst fears confirmed, she now declares that they are connected to each other by the closest bonds, that they are in the same spiritual family. Both, despite their terror of each other, are sinners in need of grace.

Inspired by this intimacy, the old woman reaches out and touches the Misfit, who responds by jumping back as though bit by a snake and shooting her three times through the chest. As the grandmother lies dead in the

3. Ibid., 150.
4. Ibid., 151.
5. Ibid., 152.
6. Ibid.
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ditch, her face smiling up to heaven, the killer wipes off his glasses. Back from the woods and excited by what he has done, the Misfit’s associate cries out, “Some fun!” The Misfit retorts, “Shut up, Bobby Lee, ain’t no pleasure in life.” On that seemingly despairing note, the story staggers to an unlikely end.7

O’Connor said that her stories were comedies, but could such a description possibly be applied to “A Good Man Is Hard to Find”? We recall that the Misfit had said that the stark choice is between giving one’s life utterly to Jesus and finding the only pleasure one can through acts of violence. Yet after an orgy of violence—thrilling to Bobby Lee—the Misfit finds no joy in his soul. Does this denial of one side of the either-or signal at least an openness to conversion, and does the wiping of his glasses indicate that he is beginning to see in a new way? Certainly, there are no clear answers to these questions, but as the story ends, grace does seem, once more, to be on offer.8 The discussion of Jesus had led the grandmother from prissy self-righteousness to something like real compassion, and it has, perhaps, brought the Misfit to the compunction necessary for *metanoia*.

This troubling and strange story is a particularly apt metaphor for the relationship between modernity and the late-medieval form of Christianity that gave rise to it. Though they have long viewed one another with deep suspicion, modern liberalism and late-medieval Christianity are in fact close relatives, the latter in many ways the mother of the former (“You’re one of my own babies!”). And both stand in need of salvation from the person to whom they both, to varying degrees of accuracy, refer: Jesus Christ, the one who throws everything off.

What I propose to develop in this book is neither a modern form of Christianity nor a Christian attack on modernity, but rather a postmodern or postliberal Catholicism, a view of God and the world that flows from the still surprising event of Jesus Christ and that pushes beyond the convictions of both modernity and conventionally construed Christianity.

A Decadent Christianity and One of Its Own Children

There have in recent years been numerous accounts of the etiology of modernity. Jürgen Habermas, Hans Urs von Balthasar, John Milbank, Colin Gunton, and Louis Dupré, among many others, have offered explanations of the transition from the premodern to the modern.9 I subscribe to the

7. Ibid., 153.
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proposal that liberal modernity can best be seen as an energetic reaction to a particular and problematic version of nominalist Christianity. Early modernity saw itself as a salutary response to oppressive and obscurantist strains in Christian culture, but since it was reacting to a corruption of true Christianity, it itself became similarly distorted and exaggerated. As a result, the two systems settled into a centuries-long and terribly unproductive warfare. Even when the two attempted a reconciliation (as in all forms of liberal Christianity in the past two centuries), the results were less than satisfactory, precisely because each party was itself a sort of caricature.

The trouble began with Duns Scotus’s option for a univocal conception of being in contradistinction to Thomas Aquinas’s analogical understanding. For Thomas, God, as the sheer act of to-be itself (ipsum esse subsistens), is that through which all creatures exist. What follows epistemologically from this metaphysical claim is that the meaning of “to-be,” in reference to God and creatures, must be analogical, with God as primary analogue and created things as secondary. In accord with this intuition, Aquinas maintained consistently throughout his career that God is inescapably mysterious to the human intellect, since our frame of reference remains the creaturely mode of existence, which bears only an analogical resemblance to the divine mode of being. We may say that God exists, but we’re not quite sure what we mean when we say it; the “cash value” of the claim that God exists is that there is a finally mysterious source of the to-be of finite things.

In an effort to make the to-be of God more immediately intelligible, Duns Scotus proposed a univocal conception of existence, according to which God and creatures belong to the same basic metaphysical category, the genus of being. Though God is infinite and therefore quantitatively superior to any creature or collectivity of creatures, there is nevertheless no qualitative difference, in the metaphysical sense, between the supreme being, God, and finite beings. Whereas Aquinas insisted that God is categorizable in no genus whatsoever, Scotus held that God and creatures do belong together to a logical category that, in a real sense, transcends and includes them. The implications of this shift are enormous and, to my mind, almost entirely negative. If the analogical conception of being is rejected, creatures are no longer seen as participating in the divine to-


be; instead, God and creatures are appreciated as existing side by side, as beings of varying types and degrees of intensity. Furthermore, unanchored from their shared participation in God, no longer grounded in a common source, creatures lose their essential connectedness to one another. Isolated and self-contained individuals (God the supreme being and the many creatures) are now what is most basically real.

Scotus’s intuition was confirmed a generation later by his Franciscan successor William of Occam. Congruent with his nominalism, which denied ontological density to the unifying features of being, Occam held that there is nothing real outside of disconnected individual things (*praeter illas partes absolutas nulla res est*).12 As for Scotus so for Occam, God and creatures are set side by side, joined only through a convention of logic that assigns them to the category of “beings.” A consequence of this conception is that God and finite things have to be rivals, since their individualities are contrastive and mutually exclusive. Just as a chair is itself precisely in the measure that it is no other creaturely thing, so God is himself only inasmuch as he stands over and against the world he has made, and vice versa. Whereas in Aquinas’s participation metaphysics the created universe is constituted by *its rapport with God*, on Occam’s reading it must realize itself through disassociation from a competitive supreme being. A further concomitant of this individualistic ontology is voluntarism. Since the metaphysically dense and natural link between God and creatures has been attenuated, any connection between the divine and the nondivine has to be through will. God’s relation with his rational creatures is therefore primarily legalistic and arbitrary.13 This understanding of divine power influenced Occam’s conception of the human will as well. Finite freedom is, for him, absolute spontaneity, an action prompted by nothing either interior or exterior to the subject. Accordingly, human power is a distant mirror of divine power: both are self-contained, capricious, absolute, and finally irrational. The most obvious practical consequence of this nominalist and voluntarist metaphysics is that divine and human freedom find themselves pitted against one another, God imposing himself arbitrarily on a necessarily reluctant and resentful humanity.

Both Martin Luther and John Calvin were formed according to the principles of late-medieval nominalism, and one does not have to look far to see evidence of that formation in their writings.14 A distant and majestic God who chooses, apparently in complete arbitrariness, that some be saved and others be damned is on clear display in Calvin’s *Institutes*, and

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13. See Gunton, *The One, the Three, and the Many*, 57–58.
a God whose power effectively trumps the freedom and integrity of the human will is readily apparent in Luther’s On the Bondage of the Will.\textsuperscript{15} Was the Reformation, at least to some degree, a radical ratification of the breakdown of an analogical conception of being?

From at least the time of Étienne Gilson, a number of scholars have acknowledged the important relationship between early modernity and medieval culture. I follow Colin Gunton and John Milbank’s suggestion that the modern can be viewed as a sharp reaction to precisely the elements in late-medieval Christianity that I have been highlighting. Many of the early modern philosophers called for a Heraclitean revolt of the many individuals against the Parmenidean imposition of divine demands, especially as those were made concrete in the church and in traditional culture. Martha Nussbaum, one of the most articulate contemporary defenders of the liberal/modern perspective, says that liberalism is essentially the valorization of the prerogatives of the individual subject, more precisely, an affirmation of that subject’s right to choose, even the meaning of his or her own life.\textsuperscript{16} What is the enemy of this freedom? For many of the fathers of modernity, it is nothing other than those traditional institutions (supported by the voluntarist conception of God) that bind the will and quash individual initiative and imagination.

We can see this paradigmatically in Descartes’s affirmation of the epistemological primordiality and meaning-creating capacity of the cogito. Dupré has remarked that subjectivism as such is not a distinctive quality of the modern, for no one was more subjective than Plato, Plotinus, or Augustine. Rather, it is the claim that the subject is itself the ground and measure of meaning and value.\textsuperscript{17} This is what we find in René Descartes’s insistence that all sense experience, all received ideas and traditions, and the very existence of God be brought before the bar of subjectivity for adjudication and evaluation. And we can see it, too, in Immanuel Kant’s claim that the moral life is grounded neither in the objectivity of nature nor in any heteronomous law, but rather in the self-legislation of the categorical imperative.\textsuperscript{18} It is furthermore apparent in Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s conviction that the only legitimate form of government is a democracy so pure that obedience to law is coincident with obedience


\textsuperscript{16} See Martha Nussbaum, Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2001), 414–25.

\textsuperscript{17} Dupré, Passage to Modernity, 89.

to self. It comes to perhaps clearest expression in Friedrich Nietzsche’s uncompromising elevation of the prerogatives of the will (a perfect mirror of the voluntarist divine will in Occam) and the concomitant need of that heroic will to put the competitive God to death.

Lest all of this seem too abstractly philosophical, the modern preference for the freedom of the individual is no more baldly and forcibly defended than in the U.S. Supreme Court’s judgment in the case of *Casey v. Planned Parenthood*: ‘At the heart of liberty is the right to define one’s own concept of existence, of meaning, of the universe, of the mystery of human life.’

This judicial formulation is an almost perfect exemplification of Jean-Paul Sartre’s archetypically modern dictum that existence (concrete freedom) precedes essence (meaning and value).

In all of this modern assertiveness, we see the reaction of the many against the one, of individuals against the tyranny of institutions and of that threatening Other lurking, acknowledged explicitly or not, behind them. In my judgment, this tension is the finally unproductive warfare between the grandmother and the Misfit, between a not very convincing form of Christianity and the opponent to whom it naturally gave rise. Modernity and decadent Christianity are enemies in one sense, but in another sense, they are deeply connected to one another and mirror one another. In most of the disputes between Christianity and modernity, we have advocates of the prerogatives of the voluntarist God facing down advocates of the voluntarist self. A central argument of this book amounts to “a plague on both your houses,” for I am convinced that both need to be saved, precisely by that person who throws everything off, including and especially the competitive understanding of God and the world that produced the conflict between them in the first place.

**Authentic Christianity and the Claims of Modernity**

The Misfit and the grandmother are enemies because each is deathly afraid of the other. The moment of grace comes when the old woman notices their shared need for redemption. So modernity and nominalist Christianity—enemies with much in common—stand in need of salvation. This redemption will come not through the clarification of ideas and certainly not through a successful *Aufhebung* of the two systems;
rather, it will come through the still surprising power of a person, the God-human Jesus Christ. The central affirmation of classical Christianity is that in Jesus of Nazareth God and humanity met in a noncompetitive and nonviolent way. According to the formulidy of the Council of Chalcedon, the human nature of Jesus is not compromised, truncated, or undermined in the process of becoming united to a divine nature. Rather, the two come together “without mixing, mingling, or confusion” in a hypostatic union, producing one who is perfect in divinity and perfect in humanity. This implies that the human mind, will, passion, and freedom of Jesus are brought to fullest pitch precisely through their union with the incarnating God. And this in turn says something of great importance about the divine. If the incarnation is an accomplished fact, then the presence of the true God is not invasive or interruptive but rather noncompetitive. In light of this coming together, we must say that there is a rapport of coinherence between divinity and humanity, each abiding in the other in such a way that humanity is elevated by the proximity of the divine.

St. Irenaeus summed up this radical idea in the pithy formula Gloria Dei homo vivens (the glory of God is a human being fully alive). God does not have to assert his prerogatives in an aggressive way over and against the claims of the created will, and hence voluntarism obtains on neither side of the Creator-creature divide. And this is precisely why Jesus throws everything off. He upsets a worldview predicated upon the primordiality of competition and ontological violence, replacing it with a vision predicated upon the primordiality of relationship and mutual indwelling.

Something very similar is on display in the surprise of the Paschal Mystery. The crucified Jesus returned alive to those who had abused, abandoned, denied, and fled from him, but he confronted them not with threats and vengeance but with the nonviolence of compassion and forgiveness. The moral disorder produced by the crucifixion of the Son of God was restored not through a violent imposition of divine retributive justice but through restorative divine forgiveness, not through a suppression of will by Will but by an insinuating invitation to love. On the basis of this luminous revelation, Christians concluded the nonviolent and relational character of God’s own being. God is not so much a monolith of power and ontological perfection as a play of love and relationality. The author of the first letter of John stated this revolutionary insight with admirable

laconicism: “God is love.” In the course of the tradition, the perception was formalized in the doctrine of the Trinity, the claim that God is a family of coinherent yet subsistent relations, each marked by the capacity for self-emptying. This trinitarian dynamic is neither the crushing weight of the one nor the fissiparous plurality of the many, but rather the one in the many and the many in the one, that mutual indwelling which is the characteristic of love. If for Aristotle relationality is accidental, for Christian metaphysics it is elemental and irreducible in itself.

From the noncompetitiveness of the incarnation and the Trinity, classical Christian theology concluded the noninvasiveness of creation. In many of the ancient myths of creation, cosmic order comes as the result of a primeval battle between the gods or through a divine victory over some recalcitrant force. And these cosmogonic myths were perpetuated in more rational form in the philosophical cosmologies of the ancient world. So for both Plato and Aristotle, worldly order comes through an intelligent shaping of some primal stuff existing alongside of divine intelligence. In both tellings of the story—mythic and philosophical—the cosmos emerges through violence, the pressing of some other into obedience through an exercise of external force. But there is none of this in the classical Christian accounts of creation. From the patristic period up until the emergence of modern deism, Christian thinkers held the doctrine of creatio ex nihilo, God’s bringing of the whole of finitude into being from nothing. This construal of the act of creation calls into question the entire tradition that I have just described, for it teaches that the order and existence of the world come not through any sort of invasion, manipulation, or external interference but through a sheerly generous and nonviolent act of selfless love. Herbert McCabe caught this truth beautifully when he said that the world is sustained in being by God much as a song is sustained in being by a singer. What follows from the nonviolence of creatio ex nihilo is the worldview that I hinted at earlier—the analogical conception of being and the participative connection of all creatures in a coinherent nexus.

This book will be an exploration and elaboration of this distinctively Christian metaphysics, and as such it will be not antimodern but postmodern. For it will take with great seriousness the modern valorization of the prerogatives of the individual and her freedom, but will show how both are preserved not over and against a competitive god but precisely in relation to the God of coinherent love. And it will be unabashedly Catholic, for it will state the radical ontology that flows from the revelation contained in Jesus Christ and that was brought to rich expression in the greatest doctors of the church, including and especially Thomas Aquinas.

The Structure of the Book

The argument of this book begins, in line with postliberal instincts, not with general religious experience, nor with the supposed universal truths of reason, but with Jesus Christ in all his specificity. Whereas most of the major liberal theologies of the past two hundred years—Friedrich Schleiermacher’s, Ernst Troeltsch’s, Rudolf Otto’s, Paul Tillich’s, Karl Rahner’s—commenced with some grounding experience deemed to be transcultural, this postliberal theology will commence with what Hans Urs von Balthasar referred to as the concretissimus, the stubbornly particular Christ. And the presentation of Jesus will not be determined by foundationalist assumptions. Unlike most modern Christologists, I will neither search for the religious experience of which Jesus supposedly gives privileged expression nor seek to uncover the “historical” Jesus underneath the Gospel portraits. Rather, I shall present an “iconic” Christology, one that takes seriously the dense particularity and spiritual complexity of the picture of Jesus as it emerges in the New Testament narratives. I shall share Balthasar’s intuition that one must approach Jesus in a Goethean spirit, which is to say, in an attitude of contemplative love, allowing the object of one’s contemplation to control the gaze of the mind. Accordingly, I will explore nine “icons” or sacred scenes from the Gospels, organizing them under the headings of Jesus as Gatherer, Jesus as Warrior, and Jesus as Lord.

Next, in light of this presentation, I will develop a christocentric epistemology. I will argue that Christians know and seek knowledge in a distinctive way, precisely because they take the narratives concerning Jesus Christ as epistemically basic. If, as the author of Colossians argues, all things hold together in Christ, then the deepest truth of things must become fully intelligible only through Christ. I will set this understanding against both great forms of modern epistemological foundationalism: John Locke’s brand of empiricism and René Descartes’s subjectivism.

In the fourth major section of the book, I will develop the themes that I’ve already adumbrated: God’s trinitarian nature and the unique mode of divine existence vis-à-vis what is other than God. I will place special focus on the issue of primary causality and secondary causality in relation to both nature and the will, arguing for the noninterruptive coinherence of God and the world. Making constant reference to Christology, I will also examine the metaphysics of the gift as it applies to God’s rapport with creation. Precisely because God does not need the world, God is capable of an utterly selfless gift on behalf of the other, breaking the rhythm of

economic exchange that effectively undermines ordinary gift giving. The sheer graciousness of God’s presence to the world becomes, in turn, the ground for our participation through love in the divine life. Throughout this section, my concern will be to demonstrate the uniquely noncontrasitive transcendence of the God disclosed in Jesus Christ.

In the final section of the book, I shall attempt to show the ethical implications of this christocentric metaphysics. Departing from both Kantian deontologism and a too abstract and rationalistic construal of the natural law, I will develop a densely christological ethic, one that flows from the biblical portrayal of the way of being characteristic of Jesus. But I will not focus directly on narratives concerning Jesus. Instead, I will paint icons of four saints who, in various ways, participated in the new life made available in Christ: Thérèse of Lisieux, Katharine Drexel, Edith Stein, and Mother Teresa of Calcutta. I will show how each of these women exemplifies the peculiar transformation that occurs when a natural virtue is elevated by contact with grace. In the process, I shall endeavor to present a christological, iconic, and narrative ethic.

Just as Flannery O’Connor saw the struggle between the Misfit and the grandmother as both tragic and an occasion of grace, so I see the battle between liberal modernity and nominalist Christianity as, at the same time, frustrating and hopeful—frustrating because both combatants are exhausted, worn out, and wounded from the struggle, and hopeful because in the very fruitlessness of the fight, both sides have come to appreciate their common need for a savior. What I propose to do in this book is to present this savior, the God-human Jesus Christ, and to explore the ramifications of his coming for both the grandmother and the Misfit, for both a decadent Christianity and a reactive modernity. This is the project of my postliberal Catholicism.
One of the most significant trends in the Christology of the modern era was the tendency to render Jesus a symbol for, or exemplification of, a universal religious sensibility. Accordingly, many modern theologians and philosophers separated the figure of Jesus (construed in either a relatively historical or a relatively literary way) from the sacred reality, holiness, religious consciousness, or divinity that he bore. This specifically christological move was in line with the general modern distinction between a “rational” religion—available in principle to all—and the specificities of the various positive revelations, about which there was, it seemed, endless and finally unresolvable disagreement. And it was congruent with one of the deepest and most abiding strains in modern consciousness: Descartes’s privileging of the interior and abstract over the exterior and specific. Descartes builds his philosophy on the foundation of the cogito, and when he addresses the world outside of his mind, he does so in a mathematicizing way, reducing objects and things to their most abstract form (res extensa).

The modern presentation of Jesus as symbol or cipher has, I will argue, emptied Christology of its content and robbed it of its evangelical bite. By focusing attention on a more abstract principle above Jesus, it has muted the strange, countercultural, and surprising novelty of what God has accomplished in Christ. Showing an alternative to this relatively abstract Christology will be the central task of this chapter.
Though this favoring of the abstract over the particular can be seen in the religious philosophies of many of the greatest modern thinkers—G. W. F. Hegel, Baruch Spinoza, G. W. Leibniz—it is nowhere more remarkably apparent than in the thought of Immanuel Kant. It therefore behooves us to examine Kant’s Christology in some detail. Having in the Critique of Pure Reason precluded the possibility of properly theoretical knowledge of God, Kant showed in the Critique of Practical Reason that God’s existence must be posited—along with freedom and immortality—as a condition for the possibility of an authentic moral life. The following of the categorical imperative—act in such a way that the maxim of your will could become a universal law—entails a sharp demarcation between duty and inclination, but the sumnum bonum (the highest happiness possible) involves the coincidence of those two tendencies. In order to live the moral life realistically, we must therefore postulate the existence of a being powerful enough to reconcile the stringent demand of duty with the pleasant pull of inclination, and this can only be the God who is Lord not only of earth but of heaven as well.

And this is why, though it does not, strictly speaking, require anything outside of itself for justification, the moral life “leads ineluctably to religion, through which it extends itself to the idea of a powerful moral Lawgiver outside of mankind.” In other words, religious belief is the generalized phenomenon that proceeds from the demand of the categorical imperative that can be found at the ground of every human will. Though it is wildly diverse in its particular manifestations, religion is one in its basic ethical structure and grounding. Importantly for Kant, it is philosophy, and not biblically based theology, that appreciates this universal and rational dimension of religion. As a consequence, if biblical theology finds itself at odds with rational religion, the former must cede to the latter.

In this typically modern move, Kant reverses the logic of faith and reason that had held sway from the patristic period through the late Middle Ages. Religion is then finally and fundamentally about not metaphysics or cosmology but morality, the disciplined response to the demand of the categorical imperative.

Now as one examines the ethical life more precisely, one finds that the press of the moral imperative is countered by a powerful and finally anomalous attraction toward evil. When he poses the question as to the origin of this evil tendency, Kant famously and surprisingly answers, “The rational origin of this perversion of our will whereby it makes lower incentives supreme among its maxims, that is, of the propensity toward

2. Ibid., 9.
evil, remains inscrutable to us.” The tendency of the will away from the categorical imperative, and hence away from its own nature, can be characterized only as an irrational perversion; yet it is undeniably real. The drama of the moral life is the struggle between duty and inclination, between the rational and irrational conditioning of desire.

In the great narratives of the Bible, we have, according to Kant, a sort of pictorial representation of this inner tension. The good and evil principles—these dynamics of the moral life—are vividly pictured in the characters and dramas of the Scriptures. Thus in the book of Genesis we read of the struggle between the first human being and a figure who is the embodiment of evil, and we see throughout the Old Testament how this original battle plays itself out over and again. For instance, the good principle is symbolized in the establishment of the Jewish theocracy, but the insinuating influence of the evil principle is given expression in the corruption and worldliness of that purportedly godly kingdom.\(^4\) In the measure that it promoted the moral virtues, the Jewish religious establishment—kings, prophets, the temple, judges, etc.—was upright, but in the measure that it fostered fussy ceremonial practices and wallowed in wealth and worldly power, it undermined itself. So the riven soul, caught between duty and self-interest.

Just as the Jews were feeling the full weight of their corrupt religious system, the biblical story takes a decisive turn. There appeared among the Jewish people a person whose wisdom was so pure that it surpassed that of the greatest philosophers, so pristine in fact that it could be described only as having descended from heaven. This man was obviously human, but he was also appreciated as an envoy from a higher world, precisely because the purity of his moral will, his incomparable innocence, indicated that he was in no way involved in the compromise with the evil principle. As his public career began, he came into conflict with the devil, who promised him total command of the earthly order if only he would bow down and worship. When this overture was turned down, the evil power took from him any worldly wealth, status, or power and sent against him “all the persecutions by means of which evil men can embitter life, causing him such sorrows as only the well-disposed can feel deeply.”\(^5\) When even these sufferings did not turn the godly man from his mission of preaching and exemplifying the moral life, the devil stirred up such hatred among his opponents that he was arrested, unjustly condemned, and put to death. But even in extremis—mocked, rejected, a failure, in agony—this good man did not sway from his mission and did not sully the purity of his will. In

\(^3\) Ibid., 38.
\(^4\) Ibid., 74.
\(^5\) Ibid., 75.
this, he effectively rendered impotent the evil principle, since he showed that a thoroughly upright moral life is possible, even in the face of the direst opposition. “So the moral outcome of the combat, as regards the hero of this story, is really not the conquering of the evil principle . . . but merely the breaking of its power to hold, against their will, those who have so long been its subjects, because another dominion, a moral dominion, is now offered them as an asylum.”6 Evil perdures, both personally and institutionally, after the death of this moral exemplar, but it no longer holds sway and is no longer feared as inevitable.

Now what gives this story—obviously that of Jesus—its greatest power is that it corresponds to an ideal that Kant maintains is present at the ground of the will, that is, the archetype of the person perfectly pleasing to God, a sort of imaginative representation of the categorical imperative. Like the idea of an infinite being in Descartes’s epistemology, this image, for Kant, is not something that the ego creates; rather it is given to consciousness. So “exterior” and unbidden is this archetype that it is most accurately described as having “come down from heaven and assumed our humanity.”7 Its role is to serve as a sort of asymptotically approached ideal of the moral life; as such, it is both efficient and final cause of ethical attainment.

What precisely are its contours? Who is the person perfectly pleasing to God? First, he is someone “who would be willing not merely to discharge all human duties himself but to spread about him goodness as widely as possible by precept and example.”8 Second, he would be confronted with the most powerful temptations and beset with the most dreadful persecution, even confronting the fear of death itself, and remain through it all true to himself and to the demand of the categorical imperative. This notion or archetype (and here we come to the heart of it) need not correspond to any real historical figure. For Kant, the image of the person perfectly pleasing to God is “from the practical point of view . . . completely real in its own right, for it resides in the morally-legislative reason.”9 So what do we make of the rather remarkable correspondence between this supposedly a priori archetype and the life of Jesus as presented in the Gospel narratives? The Gospel story of Jesus, says Kant, should be construed as an especially powerful and accurate exemplification of the moral ideal and hence as a particularly effective spur to moral excellence. Even if we were to assume that a real historical figure stood behind the narrative concerning Jesus, that figure would contribute nothing beyond the power

6. Ibid., 77.
7. Ibid., 54.
8. Ibid., 55.
9. Ibid.
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of the idea itself. Might a real person have inspired the narrative of Jesus? Perhaps, but one’s theological attention ought to be focused not on him but rather on the story to which he gave rise, or even more properly to the archetype that the story stirs to life.

This radical Kantian disjunction between the actual historical Jesus and the archetype of the person perfectly pleasing to God is, as we have seen, the result of a generally modern tendency to separate the inner and the outer, but it flows, more specifically, from the problem that Gotthold Lessing raised just before Kant commenced the critical stage of his philosophy. In 1777, four years before the Critique of Pure Reason appeared, Lessing published a short essay entitled “On the Proof of the Spirit and Power,” in which he made the distinction between “the accidental truths of history” and “the necessary truths of reason.”

Reason is hungry for apodictic truth, for a certainty beyond the vagaries of time, space, and particularity, but the contingent events of history are known in a far less than apodictic way, for they come to us only through questionable sources and often less than reliable witnesses. Thus it appears that conditional historical knowledge can never ground unconditional certitude, that there yawns, in Lessing’s phrase, a great gulf or ditch between these two ways of knowing. Now this distinction becomes especially illuminating and problematic when it is applied to the relentlessly historical religion of Christianity. On the one hand, Christian faith seems to demand certitude at both the epistemological and practical levels, but on the other hand, that faith is grounded in a particular first-century figure mediated to us by witnesses whose credibility could be questioned and texts whose interpretation is, to say the least, open ended. Lessing, to his chagrin, saw no way to get from the shaky evidence of history to the firm conviction of faith.

Kant, and most of the theologians who followed him in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, felt the knottiness of this problem in his bones. Hence negotiating, bridging, leaping, denying, or weeping over Lessing’s gulf become defining moves of much modern Christology. Kant himself set the tone by performing the operation we have just followed—the minimizing, almost to the point of irrelevancy, of the Jesus of history. In the categorical imperative and the archetype of the person perfectly pleasing to God, Kant found certain truths of reason—clear, unambiguous, universal, and accessible through immediate experience—and he effectively denied the necessity of grounding those truths in the conditioned figure of the historical Jesus. In a way, Kant solved the Lessing problem by reversing the movement: instead of proceeding from the particular to the

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universal, he went the opposite way, allowing the truth of the archetype to condition the telling of the story.

Toward the end of Kant’s life, in 1799, Friedrich Schleiermacher published his groundbreaking reflections On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers, in which he endeavored to root religious truth in the universal experience of “sensing and tasting the infinite.”¹¹ In the later and more systematic Glaubenslehre, he specified the sense of the infinite as the feeling of absolute dependency, and he identified this intuition, deeper than either thought or emotion, as the ground of religious dogma and practice. The spiritual person, he argued, is someone who, amidst all of the proximate dependencies of his life, “feels” an all-embracing and all-conditioning dependency of his being upon the power of Being itself. The source of that feeling is what religious people designate with the word God.

But what has enabled people to have this intuition? Unlike Kant’s categorical imperative, which is simply given in the structure of the will, Schleiermacher’s feeling of absolute dependency breaks into awareness through a particular historical event: the “perfect God-consciousness” of Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus is the one who, throughout his life and despite enormous opposition and strife, maintained a sense of God and, more to the point, allowed himself to be determined by God in every move, decision, and action. The steadiness and perfection of Jesus’s consciousness of God constituted, for Schleiermacher, “a real presence of God in him” and in turn made possible the pure feeling of dependency in his followers, who in their turn bequeathed it to the Christian church, thus enabling people today to participate in its power.¹² One of the clearest and most beautiful presentations of Schleiermacher’s Christology is his little dialogue Christmas Eve, in which he speculates that the feeling of real joy that people experience at Christmas is made possible by the breakthrough of divinity in the perfect God-consciousness of Jesus.¹³

Thus Schleiermacher negotiates Lessing’s gulf, not through reason but through intuition. Because we have the feeling of absolute dependency now—a feeling that is not automatically given to human consciousness—it must have been grounded in a real historical person/event and carried through time and space. Therefore, for him, Jesus is much more than a literary character or the exemplification of an a priori archetype; he is, as a concrete historical person, the condition for the possibility of our present Christian religious experience. Thus Jesus takes on, in Schleiermacher’s

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Christology, a density and particularity that is missing from Kant’s account. At the same time, we remain in a clearly modern framework. The focus of Schleiermacher’s theological attention is, as we’ve come to expect, on a general sensibility rather than on a specific revelation. Though Jesus was its trigger, the feeling of absolute dependency can and does exist apart from him; though we “learned” it through him, we can experience it without him. He is the cause of it in us, and he remains its greatest exemplification, but it transcends him and finally leaves him behind. Balthasar has commented that just as Luther urges us to look away from Christ in accord with the logic of the *sub contrario*, so Schleiermacher compels us to look away from him in accord with the emphasis on the primacy of experience: finally it is not Jesus that matters but the feeling that he makes possible in us.¹⁴

Something very similar can be found in Schleiermacher’s most faithful twentieth-century disciple, the Lutheran theologian Paul Tillich. Adopting Schleiermacher’s feeling of absolute dependency in a Heideggerian mode, Tillich identifies the ground of religion in the sense of being unconditionally concerned. In the German of his *Marburg Dogmatics*, this is specified as a state of being affected by *was uns unbedingt angeht* (what in an unconditioned way presses on us).¹⁵ Amidst all of the proximate interests, goals, fears, and hopes that press upon us in a less than ultimate way, there is, Tillich wagers, a concern that preoccupies us in an unceasing and absolute manner. This *Unbedingte* (unconditioned) can be named variously as justice itself, the good itself, the true itself, but Tillich’s preferred appellation—following both Schleiermacher and Heidegger—is *Sein Selbst* (Being itself). All religious feeling, thought, and action are rooted, finally, in the sense of being seized by the revealing power of this reality, both radically immanent and radically transcendent.

As a post-Kierkegaardian and post-Freudian, Tillich is more conscious than Schleiermacher of what goes wrong with our religiosity, how this ultimate concern becomes twisted and misconstrued. The basic problem, as he reads it, is the all-too-human tendency to substitute the less than unconditioned for the unconditioned—in biblical terms, to fashion idols. Thus a political party, a nation-state, a charismatic leader, money, sex, or power is deemed unsurpassably important, and the result is a skewing of the soul’s order, an estrangement of the person and God. Tillich’s Lutheranism becomes especially apparent in his identification of the religious traditions themselves as key culprits in this process of alienation. Precisely because


they bear the most sacred reality, religions have a particular proclivity toward inflation, that is to say, toward a self-idolatry, an identification of their own laws, practices, and beliefs with the unconditioned God.

Now where precisely does Jesus fit into this schema? The fact that I am posing the question in this way shows, of course, that we are dealing with a modern Christology, one that situates Jesus within an overarching and preexisting general frame of reference. For Tillich, Jesus is the bearer of the unconditioned who, in the most radical and complete sense, points beyond himself to that which he bears and thereby allows God in his fullness to appear. Every other religious figure or tradition collapses in on itself, hence blocking the breakthrough of the unconditioned, but Jesus remains utterly transparent. This is clear not only in his ministry and teaching but above all in his cross. In that culminating moment, Jesus permits himself to be cast aside, disregarded, forgotten, so that the divinity he bears might remain the focus of attention. In this, paradoxically enough, he embodies the perfection of revelation. Through the cross, Jesus becomes the mediator of a perfect revelation, because in that awful moment he, as the bearer of the unconditioned, is “shaken” and questioned, and therefore any tendency he might have to block the light of God is precluded. In his later Systematic Theology, Tillich makes much the same point when he says that Jesus is the breakthrough of the New Being under the conditions of estrangement. Into a sinful world came someone who, despite every temptation to idolatry and self-inflation, remained connected to the unconditioned. When this purity of being was recognized by Peter (“You are the Christ”), Christianity came into existence.

Does the historical Jesus matter for Tillich? Yes, for he construes the christological project in a fundamentally Schleiermacherian way: our capacity to be seized by the unconditioned now depends upon the real breakthrough of that power in time, mediated by a real historical figure. But, as with Schleiermacher, this Jesus matters only “thinly,” which is to say, as a symbol of or cipher for a more general existential condition. Consequently, Tillich remained essentially uninterested in the details of historical-critical research into the life of Jesus, once quipping, “I do not wish the telephone in my office to ring and to hear from some New Testament colleague: ‘Paulus, our research has now finally removed the object of your ultimate concern; we cannot find your Jesus anywhere.’” His point was not that Jesus’s existence doesn’t matter but that our knowledge of it is not dependent primarily upon an analysis of the past.

So far we have examined this strain of modern Christology as it manifested itself in three Protestant thinkers. It is also apparent in a

16. Ibid., 67.
17. Quoted in Langdon Gilkey, Gilkey on Tillich (New York: Crossroad, 1990), 151.
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Catholic framework. The best known and most influential Catholic who worked in the Kant/Schleiermacher tradition was Karl Rahner. Though he was a professor of systematic theology, Rahner’s starting point for theological analysis was almost invariably *Religionsphilosophie*—more precisely, a Kantian/Heideggerian philosophical anthropology. In every concrete act of knowing, the human being, says Rahner, is oriented to the horizon of all that can possibly be known, toward the fullness of being. And in every particular act of the will, he is lured toward the horizon of all that can possibly be desired, toward the good in itself. This orientation toward what Rahner calls *das heilige Geheimnis* (the Holy Mystery) constitutes the transcendentally religious structure of the human spirit; it is the human being’s capacity to be a “hearer of the Word.”

Like the feeling of absolute dependency, the categorical imperative, and ultimate concern, this standing in the presence of absolute mystery is the subjective existential ground for religion. It amounts, in Rahner’s famous phrase, to a “supernatural existential,” a basic orientation toward the supernatural present in the natural structure of the human spirit.

The opening section of *The Foundations of Christian Faith*, the closest that Rahner ever came to writing a complete systematics, is a detailed development of the anthropology that I have just sketched. Only in the second section does Rahner address the person of Jesus, placing him in the context of the general philosophical view. This approach—so structurally similar to Kant’s, Schleiermacher’s, and Tillich’s—identifies Rahner as a modern. Jesus is presented as the fullest exemplification and realization of transcendental anthropology, as that human being who responded most completely and consistently to God’s offer of grace. Rahner states this in a memorable adage: “Christology is fully developed anthropology; anthropology is incomplete Christology.” Once more, Jesus is looked at not directly but obliquely as the prime exemplar of a general religious sensibility. In Tillich’s *Systematic Theology*, the doctrine of God as the source of ultimate concern is extremely well developed, while the doctrine of Jesus is remarkably sketchy. So in Rahner, theological anthropology is articulated at great length, while Christology is quite thin. These imbalances are the result of the basic decision that both these theologians took to mute the specificity and strangeness of Jesus in favor of the relative accessibility of religious experience.

How do we assess this modern christological style that places emphasis on Jesus as symbol or cipher? In one sense, it grows up out of the classical concern to show the continuities between the Logos that appears in Jesus of Nazareth and the religiosity that is a natural dimension of the human

spirit. From the time of Justin Martyr and Origen, Christian theologians have been keen to demonstrate this relationship, lest Jesus be construed as simply anomalous. Even Tertullian, who posed the famous rhetorical question “What does Athens have to do with Jerusalem?” nevertheless could speak of an anima naturaliter Christiana. Therefore that Christ should be placed in relationship to the moral clarity of the categorical imperative or to the intuitive sense of absolute dependency or ultimate concern is not only possible but theologically desirable.

A problem arises, however, when we consider the hermeneutical assumptions that govern this juxtaposition. In the modern thinkers that we have been analyzing, interpretive primacy is consistently given to the generic over the specific, so that Jesus is “positioned” by something beyond him. In Kant, for instance, it is not Jesus in his uniqueness who determines the content of the categorical imperative; rather, it is the imperative that renders Jesus intelligible as a religious symbol. And in Rahner, it is not the concrete Christ that specifies the nature of absolute mystery but rather the experience of the absolute mystery that renders Christ credible. But does this mode of interpretation adequately account for the sense of novelty and evangelical excitement that can be found on practically every page of the New Testament and that animated the first proclaimers of the faith to preach Christ even at the risk of their lives? If Jesus is simply a symbol for or bearer of a general religious consciousness, why would his life and death matter so much, and why would people have to witness precisely to him? Even if we say, with Schleiermacher and Tillich, that the unsurpassable religious insight broke through with Jesus, why would we have to dwell on his story in all of its peculiarity once we had experienced absolute dependency or ultimate concern? Wouldn’t he be much like the ladder that, having gotten us to the level we desire, could simply be kicked away? Would he not devolve—as in Roger Haight’s very typically modern christological project—into one bearer of divinity among many?19

Another aspect of the Gospel witness that this strain of modern Christology tends to overlook is the summons to action. One could argue that the Gospels organize themselves around two poles: the call to conversion (“repent and believe the good news”) and the call to mission (“go out to all the nations and preach the good news”). Though it has from the beginning included a contemplative dimension, Christianity is not essentially a contemplative form of life, as are, for example, Buddhism and Platonism. It is rather a mission and a way. In The Grammar of Assent, John Henry Newman distinguishes between what he calls “notional assent” and “real assent,” the intellectual acquiescence that we give, respectively, to abstrac-

Thus, one assents notionally to the formulas and arguments in Aquinas’s *Summa contra gentiles*, but one assents really to the north rose window at Notre Dame. When one wants, says Newman, to move others to action, one ought to appeal not to the notional but to the real, since abstractions engage the mind but particulars impel a person to act. So when Winston Churchill wanted to summon his compatriots to the defense of their homeland, he offered them not arguments but “blood, toil, tears, and sweat.” Thus, what must stand at the center of the activity that is Christianity cannot be an abstraction, a principle, a sensibility, or a conviction, but rather Christ himself, the one from whom real assent can be elicited.

When the particularity of Jesus is read through the interpretive lens of abstract religion, conversion and mission are compromised. No one will give her life for the feeling of absolute dependency or for the sustenance of ultimate concern; but she might be willing to give her whole self to *this* Christ, *this* crucified and risen Lord.

Though he was reluctant to embrace Karl Barth’s image of Christ’s purely perpendicular relationship with the world, Balthasar was pleased to compare Jesus to a mountain flood that overwhelms the turbines pathetically poised to master it. Whatever receptive capacity there is in us (and Balthasar certainly affirmed this *capax Dei*), it is filled to the point of overflowing, finally overwhelmed, by the novelty and fullness of Jesus. This is furthermore why Balthasar claimed that Christian theology becomes truly compelling precisely at the point where Rahner’s theological anthropology ends: it is not the human being in the presence of absolute mystery that finally matters but rather the Jesus who shows in an utterly surprising way the true nature of that mystery. It also explains why Balthasar kept focusing his (and our) theological attention on the concrete form that is Jesus (*Schau der Gestalt*): you have to look here, at him, and not at the hazy background that surrounds him.

The most elemental difficulty with the liberal Christology we’ve been examining—a difficulty that gives focus to the two problems already discussed—is that it compromises the proclamation of Jesus’s divinity. In its refutation of Nestorianism, the Council of Ephesus in 431 maintained that Jesus cannot be construed simply as a “God-bearing man,” someone who, like an ordinary saint, would point to God or be in close relationship with God. Nestorius had referred to Jesus as divine, but he meant this only


21. “If anyone dares to say that Christ was a God-bearing man and not rather God in truth, being by nature one Son, even as ‘The Word became flesh,’ and is made partaker of flesh and blood precisely like us, let him be anathema.” *Decretals of the Council of Ephesus* in *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, edited by Norman Tanner (London: Sheed and Ward, 1990), 60.
in the highly analogical sense that Jesus was transparent to God through the perfection of his moral and spiritual life. But the council insisted that this extrinsicist and relational reading failed to honor the radicality of the New Testament witness that in dealing with Jesus one is dealing with God, and hence it opted, in line with Nicaea and anticipating Chalcedon, for an ontological presentation. Are the modern Christologies of Kant, Schleiermacher, Tillich, and Rahner not susceptible to the charge of neo-Nestorianism? Can they account adequately for the distinction between Jesus and the great saints? Is the difference between the God-consciousness of Jesus and that of, say, Francis of Assisi only quantitative and not qualitative? Or more precisely, is the posing of the question around an issue such as God-consciousness or the feeling of ultimate concern not to be prejudiced necessarily in favor of a merely quantitative demarcation?

One of Balthasar’s most trenchant critiques of Rahner’s Christology is that Rahner cannot finally distinguish between the radical openness to God found in his Jesus and that found in Mary, the one who, in the depth of her being, said yes to the invitation of the Holy Spirit. The Council of Ephesus is helpful on just this point, because while it famously referred to Mary as *Theotokos* (God-bearer), it assiduously denied, as we saw, that Jesus could be similarly named. Jesus is not simply greater than Mary; he is somehow else. Are the largely symbolic interpretations that we have been considering capable of articulating this strangeness?