A SEEMINGLY CRIPPLED JESUS

Jesus: Symbol of God by Roger Haight*

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"I wish that what Haight says and teaches would be said and taught by the Church... but is the Church saying and teaching what Haight says?"

In many ways: "I wish I were not asked to appraise the work but..."

It is understandable that the author will not have to agree with the mind of the reader. And it is equally understandable that the reader may not agree either with the mind of the author. Still, the author, as well as the work, deserve all the respect and, if possible, the objective appraisal of his thoughts and explanations.

The first two chapters, dealing with "Questions on Method," intend to set somehow the status quaestionis. On debatable issues, such an introduction is determinant for a proper understanding of the body of the discussion. What happens, though, when the status quaestionis is not clear or accurate or acceptable to the reader? Then, the rest of the work becomes a question mark. For me, the acceptability depends on the merit of the explanation. My initial concern, though, was that I found the explanation of terms less than clear. The concepts of "sign" and "symbol" need a very clear presentation because

confusing “natural” and “conventional” signs does not help. Neither does it help to confuse all the various kinds of “analogies” and reduce them to “metaphorical” analogies. One cannot equiparate, for example, the expression “Lion of Judah” with “Jesus is Son of God.” All human language referring to the divine is “analogous,” yes; but not with the same type of analogy.

The idea of the “Hermeneutical Method of Critical Correlation” needs likewise a more clarificatory presentation in order to be properly grasped by readers not familiar with such concepts or terminology. “Given today’s pluralism in theology,” says Haight:

...a systematic account of any topic requires an explanation of the method that is being employed. The description of a method should be clear enough to provide a schematic map of what will unfold in the pages of a work.... I propose in two interactive moments a hermeneutical method that involves a critical correlation of tradition and present-day experience.... The logic of hermeneutical theory can be appreciated in two fundamental movements.... First, the condition for appreciating the claim that meaning of the past has on the present is precisely the release of past meaning from its individual instanciation in the past.... The second condition for appreciating the meaning of a past text, and especially for affirmation of its truth, is the retrieval of that meaning within the context of a new particular situation.²

Similar remarks can be made about the “Historical-Hermeneutical Approach” (55ff.). “The meaning of Jesus cannot be contained,” affirms Haight:

Just as the real historical meaning of Jesus can be seen continually to expand in relation to the situations and groups he encountered during his lifetime, so too, it continues to expand through time....³ The object of the historian’s inquiry is an empirical-historical knowledge of Jesus, that is, a knowledge of Jesus as he appeared in history.... At the origin of Christianity, it was said, was the fact that people encountered God in or through Jesus, and it is that phenomenon that lies at the base of the theological interest in Jesus.⁴

In the next 14 chapters, the author will be coming back for and to
these concepts, but one never comes out with a clear grasp of the concepts. Hence, at the end, if one is really interested in the work, one is tempted to start the reading all over again.

A common practice to avoid confrontational approaches is to present issues under the cover of somebody else. "According to Schleiermacher..."; "according to Rahner..."; "according to Sobrino..."; "according to Schillebeeckx...". At the end, one does not know for sure whether the affirmations made are part of the author's mind or he simply is quoting to present another, different view (75-78 and 424-466). Let me quote a concrete example:

Wesley J. Wildman, in *Fidelity with Plausibility: Modest Christologies in the Twentieth Century* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), presents a detailed map of the present theological terrain relative to the narrow christological question. Christology is currently undergoing a crisis of plausibility, mainly because of the collapse of the credibility of the absolutist claims attributed to Jesus Christ. 

Are those affirmations from Wildman's work, or are they affirmations made by Haight?

At the beginning of the work, the author realistically but too arbitrarily chooses to elaborate four "christologies," "four genres of Jesus" (60), with the seeming criterion that they are "representatives" of all other christologies. They are: 1) Jesus as Prophet; 2) Jesus as Teacher; 3) Jesus as Healer; 4) Jesus as Savior or Liberator. The approach is realistic in the sense that an extensive elaboration of all the various christologies would turn out to be too voluminous.

Granting the validity of such a selection, what nobody is entitled to do is to present them, along with the rest of the work, as if they are the only ones, and thereby pontificating about some on behalf of the others. About Jesus as Prophet, Haight says:

The centering characteristic of Jesus as a religious figure in first century Palestine was his prophetic preaching of the Kingdom of God for the restoration of Israel. This provides the framework for interpreting him; other aspects of his story would be integrated into this one.
About Jesus as Healer, Haight has this to say:

Like the other genres of Jesus, this one too should be understood in an inclusive way that encompasses other aspects of Jesus. It does not exclude Jesus' teaching or the prophetic dimension of his ministry.\(^7\)

About Jesus as Savior or Liberator, Haight affirms:

The genre of Jesus as savior or liberator is proposed here as one that has been continually applied to Jesus after his death and, in the light of an Easter experience, right up to the present...\(^8\) The appropriation of Jesus as savior or liberator is open to a variety of nuances. On the one hand, Jesus' public career possessed a variety of facets; on the other hand, Jesus always communicates meaning to human existence by responding to the implied questions of those searching for a salvation or liberation.\(^9\)

For a work that seems to have in mind a total re-evaluation or a total change of the christologies of the last twenty centuries, I think he owes it to the reader to take seriously the task and make it comprehensive even if it would take three or four volumes, rather than give us an extremely reduced sketch and leaving the reader to wonder about the validity of the conclusions arrived at by the author from such a partial and subjective presentation.

Aware of this lack of "comprehensive" analysis, Haight gives a rather light excuse, calling the fourth part:

...an essay at a systematic and constructive christology. It represents something of a leap from the period of the classical christological councils into the modern period. This should not be construed as a silent suggestion that nothing of import was generated in the intervening period, especially with medieval and reformation theology. It is simply a case of having to work within the limits of one volume.\(^{10}\)

It is shocking, for example, to see the banality with which the author dismisses the "Son-of-Man" christology when in fact it is one of the richest (and coincidentally one of the most difficult) christologies. The author simply focuses too much attention on the
christologies of the historical Jesus, the Logos (to be “re-interpreted”) and the Liberator. Important as they are, they certainly do not render justice to the rest of them.

Even more amazing is the claim that a few pages (eight in all) (215-223) are enough to summarize “Eastern Soteriology” and to interpret the teachings of Justin, Irenaeus, Athanasius and Origen. A similar approach is taken in the appraisal of “Western Soteriology” (223-232) and the “interpretation” of Augustine, Anselm and Abelard as the “representatives” of Western soteriology. The lagoons are too large and the selectivity too subjective not to be noticed.

Chapter 11 concentrates on a presentation of the allegedly opposite christologies of Schleiermacher and Barth. One does not have to be very keen to realize from the start the preferences of the author for Schleiermacher. Whatever that may be, it becomes clear that the mind of the author is ultimately neither on Barth nor on Schleiermacher. The ultimate focus is rather on “Postmodern christology.” That, in our understanding, is the main contribution of Haight who patterns his affirmation after the interpretation of Nicaea and Chalcedon (chapter 10). Then most of the sayings in the last five chapters of the book become repetitious.

The vision of Haight is to search for the “historical Jesus,” not for the glorified. As the historical Jesus is fully human like the rest of us, and as such he is born and raised within the framework of a culture, so we, his followers, are to pattern ourselves within our culture and meet God in the medium of the “historical Jesus.”

The historical redeemer stands as the author of Christian faith and as the medium through which the man informed by his faith apprehends his relation to God, to the world and to himself.\(^1\)

The “discipleship” approach is first to meet Jesus and from this personal encounter to turn myself to be like Christ, and then I turn my culture to be Christlike.

The particular historicity of the events behind the miracle stories is simply not known. But this is not really important. In principle, miracle stories of themselves can tell us nothing of the divine ori-
gin of Jesus. Moreover, in some instances, a literal imagination can obscure and conceal Jesus’ mediation of the divine. Especially in secular cultures today, the more Jesus is depicted as a supernatural miracle worker, the less is he a credible mediator of God’s transcendent and sovereign power. Although it is historically certain that Jesus cared for the sick and those who suffered, exactly how this was manifested is secondary. Divine power in Jesus’ life is mysterious. We cannot know its mechanism or how it operated. But at the same time it seems historically accurate to say that people in Jesus’ time, and probably Jesus himself, understood God to be at work in his ministry.¹²

“Christology that begins with research into the historical Jesus,” insists Haight:

...is led to presuppose not the “humanity” of Jesus, but the concrete image of him as a historical figure, a human being. Thus Jesus was empowered by God as Logos within him. That which dwells in the human being Jesus, from the first moment of his existence, is God as revealing presence and Word. Thus the human being Jesus is the symbol and expression of God as Logos present to him. The enhypostatic union is the union of no less than God as Word with the human person Jesus.¹³

One is struck by the outright dismissal of the christology from above and the overconfidence about the christology from below. It seems as if the last twenty centuries of Christianity hardly existed. One meets the “historical” Jesus of Nazareth and after the original appearance of the Jesus of Nazareth, the rest becomes a christology from above that needs to be reinterpreted. This leaves us with no alternative but to go back and encounter the historical Jesus so as to meet God in him. “I wish to preserve the formal structure of Rahner’s theology of symbol,” says Haight:

...as it is applied to Jesus Christ, but recast it in the framework of a christology from below and an Antiochene pattern of understanding the duality of Jesus’ humanity and divinity. This results in an incarnational christology in which the created human being or person Jesus of Nazareth is the concrete symbol expressing the presence in history of God as Logos.¹⁴
Obviously, using hyperbole, one gets the impression that nothing worthy has happened in christology including the Gospel of John and the letters of Paul until Haight came about to open our eyes on how to meet God in Jesus again. Is there such a distinction, separation, between Jesus and Christ? Is this not the same Jesus described by Philippians (2:6-11) who undergoes a kenotic process to be glorified by God? Of course, the perennial question will always remain: Whatever happened to the divinity of Jesus, “the divine form” that he gave up to assume “the form of a slave”? Trying to put a “light of reason” on an issue that calls for the “light of faith” is simply struggling to put all the water of the ocean into the dimensions of a bucket. And to presume that the light of reason can truly light the mystery of Jesus is simply to be hallucinating.

Haight presents first the need for an “interpretation” of the doctrines of Nicaea and Chalcedon: “Educated people today,” he affirms:

...are at least implicitly aware of the need to be explicit in reinterpreting classical christological language. Indeed, no adequate christology can fail to include a critical evaluation of these doctrines.\(^{15}\)

Haight explains the need to “interpret” Nicaea and Chalcedon, as well as the divinity of Jesus and the doctrine of the Trinity. He arrives at the conclusion that Scripture, as well as the councils, talk only about the oneness of God, God the Father; Jesus and Spirit are but different expressions of the same monotheistic confession. Talking about Jesus, Haight says:

The meaning of Nicaea is that no less than God was and is present and at work in Jesus. This means that the God encountered in Jesus for our salvation is truly God. And this statement of the divinity of Jesus implies a second statement about God: God is immanent in and personally present to human existence. This is how God is revealed to be in Jesus.\(^{16}\)

Enumerating the presuppositions required for a proper interpretation of the doctrine of Chalcedon, Haight affirms:
A first supposition and premise for interpreting the doctrine of Chalcedon is that Jesus was and is a human being.... In fact, too, Jesus was a man, but no generalized significance can be assigned to his sex.... From a theological perspective, Jesus could have been a woman.... Second, God's presence to Jesus must be regarded as a presence within his humanity.... The divine is not apparent in Jesus in any recognizable way, because it does not subsist in him apart or separate from the integrally human life that Jesus lived.... Third, Jesus' freedom is integral and autonomous.17

This interpretation obviously leads to the rejection of the "classic" understanding of the distinction of hypostasis or persons in the Trinity (288-292).

The reality of Jesus as a human being needs to be stated with sharper historical force in our day: Jesus was a human person....18 Chalcedon and Nicaea together represent in a formal way the dialectical structure of Christian faith: Jesus Christ, a historical symbol of God, makes God present in history. Jesus of Nazareth was a human being with a human existence and identity consubstantial with us. But Jesus, as the religious symbol that constitutes Christian faith, makes God present in the World. Nicaea represents and defends the divine dimension of Jesus Christ; Chalcedon reasserts his integral human existence.19

The biblical symbol, the Spirit of God, refers to God. God as Spirit, or the Spirit of God, is simply God, is not other than God, but is materially and numerically identical with God. God as Spirit is God. God as Spirit, or the Spirit of God, is simply God, is not other than God, but is materially and numerically identical with God. God as Spirit is God. But God as Spirit refers to God from a certain point of view; it indicates God at work, as active, and as power, energy, or force that accomplishes something....20 The symbol of God as Spirit is not a personification of God, but refers more directly to God, so that it is clear from the beginning that nothing less than God was at work in Jesus.21

"Traditional" theology would call this teaching "modalism" or dynamic monarchicalism.
"Jesus saves by revealing and making God present" (440). In the interpretation of Jesus as a "symbol" and "medium" of salvation, Haight pursues another critical issue, the "universality" of Jesus' salvation while talking about the relation between Christianity and other religions (chapter 14). Since the author claims that Jesus is the medium, the "symbol" of God's presence where we meet God, he is the medium only for those who "experience" him as the go-between to the divine. For people who lived before Jesus (Jews or non-Jews), the medium was and is different: it could be the Torah, it could be another "sacred book" that for them has the same religious value and capacity to meet God. This approach is of critical relevance, for better or for worse, in the so-called "inter-religious dialogue." Doubtless, the explanation of Haight is very "likeable" and would easily catch the attention of people belonging to other religions. One can easily see how "popular" such an approach would be. All religions are equal, they are means, "media" equally valid to encounter the divine and hence to be saved. If popularity would be the criterion for the truth and the criterion for salvation, I would join the choir.

For me, the most intriguing chapters are the last three dealing with "Jesus and the World Religions," "The Divinity of Jesus Christ" and "Trinity." As a matter of fact, reaching chapter 10 on "Interpreting Nicaea and Chalcedon," I wanted to jump immediately to the reading of the last three chapters, since obviously they are intimately connected with one another. Only a deliberate effort prevented me from doing that. The reason for this "impatience" may have been due to an inner intuition that Haight will finally (and logically) proclaim his disbelief in the divinity of Jesus or in the Trinity. Surprisingly, though, at the beginning of chapters 15 and 16, Haight makes very strong affirmations about faith in the divinity of Jesus and in the Trinity, but he turns around and rebounds on the "interpretation" of both doctrines according to his theories of interpretation done in relation to Nicaea and Chalcedon (see 288-296).

"Is Jesus God?" "The answer to this question is yes, but an attenuated yes.... Jesus is truly God, but less than the transcendent Father from whom he is eternally begotten" (261). Haight states:
I now take up the formal and narrow christological question concerning the relation of Jesus to God and to other human beings. How are we to understand constructively what has traditionally been known as Jesus’ divinity? This chapter has as its object to “explain” or construe Jesus’ divinity in terms that remain faithful to the witness of the New Testament and the classical conciliar doctrines, best portray this doctrine in a credible and intelligible way in present-day postmodern intellectual culture and empower discipleship.22

In chapter 15, Haight tackles the question, subjects John’s and Paul’s christology, as well as the councils of Nicaea to “historical” interpretation and comes out with the clear conclusion that historically it cannot be said like that, that the teachings of John and Paul are post-historical and that the pronouncements of Nicaea and Chalcedon about the hypostasis have to be “interpreted” according to the “real purpose” of those councils which are not what the Church has understood in the following sixteen centuries or so, but rather something else in line with the frame of mind of Haight. Hence, Jesus is not God, although he is full of the divinity. He is a pure man where one encounters or experiences the presence of the divinity. Thus, it seems to me that the logical conclusion from Haight’s affirmations about whether Jesus is God (cf. 256, 261, 270 and 288-296) is that the Church has been wrong all along the centuries in considering Jesus as God. Jesus should be considered only “divine” or “divinized” (273, 289).

Pluralism of christology? For Haight the answer is a positive yes.

Pluralism in christology is now a desired ideal for which christology consciously strives. This turns the problematic of unity and diversity inside out: christology has been a unity tolerating diversity; it is becoming diversity in the quest of unity.23

What makes the difference is that Haight proposes not only a pluralism of expression (the adaptation of Jesus to the culture and ways of each generation and ethnic situation), but rather a pluralism of contents depending on the experience of the divine in the Jesus of history. “Pluralism,” explains Haight:
...means differences within a wider unity. Pluralism, as I understand it, presupposes a larger unity. Some common denominator, some defining element, or context, or sphere of interaction, constitutes a unity that is differentiated. Pluralism, therefore, means that real, solid, and persistent differences prevail between people, between their views, between who they think they are as human beings, between the ways in which they act, and thus between the peoples themselves. But these differences are not all that characterize the relations between them. The differences are not complete; they subsist within a larger framework of something shared, some sameness or unity: of the species, of historical interaction, of a region, a society, a loyalty to a country, a common religious faith. This means that at some level one can find commonalities among the differing parties that bind them together, even though the term “pluralism” emphasizes differences. In what follows I want to demonstrate why pluralism is both necessary and possible in christology.  

Does Justin in his christology affirm what Haight claims he affirms? And the same question is raised about the affirmations concerning the christology of Irenaeus and Origen (cf. 249-255, 262, 281-283). “For in Origen,” says Haight, “Jesus Christ does have a human soul; his is not a Logos-sarx christology” (255). Considering that Origen is a leading proponent of the school of Alexandria, affirming that Origen is not a Logos-sarx proponent is a statement that needs to be proven. Haight seems to have the propensity to make too many “gratuitous” affirmations about authors so as to fit into his frame of mind. The “old-timers” used to call that petitio principii.

What is the position of Haight in the consideration of the authority of the Church as a source of theology? Haight’s rejection of “external” authority in theology raises the question about the need for the Church, the hierarchical aspect of the Church. The Church seems to be reduced to a gathering of people that has experienced in its own way the presence of God in Jesus. Beyond that, one does not see much of a need for the hierarchy or for the whole Church in the teachings of Haight. Two examples:

The shift of the framework for understanding has rendered the traditional language incredible.
Many of the traditional expressions of how Jesus saves resemble myths that no longer communicate to educated Christians; some are even offensive. Many of the traditional theological “explanations” of salvation through Christ do no better.  

The way Haight explains christology, it seems to me that the ultimate criterion is the individual’s experience of God in Jesus. Any elaboration, any systematization of such an experience becomes a christology from above and therefore subject to interpretation under the ultimate criterion of the historical Jesus.

“Inculturation” is, for sure, spoken highly of by Haight, though he does not offer a clear definition of the meaning of “inculturation.”

All theology and christology are culturally situated. The pluralism of contemporary christologies requires that every christological proposal take stock of the situation, context, and social location out of which it arises.

It seems to me that a great number of authors, Haight included, narrow the meaning of inculturation to “ethnic” inculturation, an insertion or contextualization within the various ethnic groups. In a different context, perhaps, they identify “ethnic” inculturation with “national” culture. It is not a fancy to think that there are many other levels of inculturation, from the so-called “globalization” process to the individual inculturation passing through the different areas of racial, national, gender or of modern and post-modern sense of inculturation. What type of inculturation is, for instance, Jesus’ reality? From the divine to become just human? If he is only human, is his inculturation the fact that he became a Jew, a male, etc.? All these questions give us some food for thought because, from the way Haight explains inculturation, it seems that once one has experienced the presence of God in Jesus, from there, with any change in context, with any change in time, the previous christology becomes useless.

**Christ-man, Christ-God?** In relation to previous christology becoming useless, we may ask: Why then do we use expressions like Christ-man, Christ-God? In Athanasius, we learn that:

Jesus is not a human being identical with all others, but a bodily
form or vehicle in which the divine being, the Word, is the actor. The contrast for today’s audience, then, can be underlined simply by indicating the attention given to Jesus as a human being and the quest for the historical Jesus. Scripture scholars who pursue the historical Jesus assume naturalist premises; they reason and decide issues on the basis of Jesus being a human being. In christology the premise is not that Jesus Christ is a divine being, nor is the task to explain how he was a human being. Rather, the premise is that he was a human being, and the task is to understand how God’s salvation was worked through him.\textsuperscript{28}

According to Haight, we talk of Christ-man to explain God’s salvation: how God saves through Jesus, the man in whom we encounter God’s salvation. On the other hand, we talk about Christ-God to explain that salvation comes ultimately from God.

\textbf{Continuity.} The sense of “continuity” between the Old and the New Testament, the chain of faith between the apostolic faith, the faith of our ancestors and our faith today would be nowhere to be found. If only Jesus is the medium of Christian faith (195), what happened to the link between both Testaments? Is the Old Testament useless for our encounter with God in Jesus?

Christianity is rooted in the inheritance of the Old Testament. To claim the exclusive “mediation” of Jesus for our faith would be equivalent to a total disregard of the Old Testament.

Jesus (the authentic Jesus is the historical), not the Christ (the glorified), is the “medium” for our faith. “Christology began with Jesus of Nazareth, and it must begin with Jesus today” (55). But we do not have the “immediate” contact with Jesus. And the disciples who had it, believed, experienced God in the Christ (already exalted).

The status of Jesus being a medium of God for his disciples was confirmed in the Easter experience. Jesus’ exaltation was experienced as God’s validation of Jesus’ mediation of God. In the light of Jesus being so glorified, formal christologies began to develop. Christology is the interpretation of Jesus Christ as the medium of God’s self-communication to human existence.\textsuperscript{29}
Hence that, related to the previous issue, is the consideration that only the "historical Jesus" is the medium of faith. How can we, people in the third millennium claim an "immediate" experience with the historical Jesus? Only with a "chain" of faith throughout the centuries can we claim contact with the historical Jesus, not through any kind of immediate experience.

Is Haight an appropriate theology for seminarians, for beginners? I believe that theology can be discussed at two levels, namely, the level of beginners who get into the field for the first time, and the level of the established theologians who are presumed mature and already well-enlightened people.

I do not know whether Haight intends his work for the first or for the second level of readers. Given the number of serious issues that Haight raises in his work, one wonders whether his teachings are appropriate for classroom presentation in the undergraduate level. After decades of teaching soteriology, I still believe that what students taking theology at the "institutional" level should receive is the "classic," well-digested and accepted teachings of the Church. Presenting issues, the way Haight does, to students who get into the field of theology for the first time is bound to be counterproductive, provoking such a state of mind that, at the end, will confuse more than enlighten. For one must not forget that Haight would be but one among many of the various "new" approaches" and "interpretations" of the history of salvation.

Now, presenting "theories" like Haight's to theologians with a basic background already in place would be a different question all together. I believe that Haight offers a number of scholarly challenging issues worth debating among professional theologians with the end-purpose of enlightening each other on "other ways" of looking at Jesus or any other theological issue.

Let me finish by setting my view straight. My opinion is that the work of Haight is worth reading but confusing. It is "pioneering" but highly questionable. It intends to sound comprehensive but there are large lagoons that need to be filled up. It is intellectually provoking,
but dogmatically unstable. It is a work on Jesus but the Jesus one learns about from the book seems to be crippled.

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Notes

2Ibid., 42.
3Ibid., 56.
4Ibid., 58.
5Ibid., 424, note 1.
6Ibid., 66.
7Ibid., 74.
8Ibid., 75.
9Ibid., 78.
10Ibid., 301.
11Ibid., 307.
12Ibid., 82.
13Ibid., 442.
14Ibid., 439.
15Ibid., 273.
16Ibid., 284.
17Ibid., 292-93.
18Ibid., 296.
19Ibid., 298.
20Ibid., 447-48.
21Ibid., 451.
22Ibid., 424.
23Ibid., 319.
24Ibid., 425.
25Ibid., 292.
26Ibid., 335.
27Ibid., 301.
28Ibid., 222-23.
29Ibid., 196.