



Research article

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**A HIGH CHRISTOLOGICAL ENGAGEMENT OF PLURALISM
IN A POSTMODERN CONTEXT**

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ABSTRACT



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The purpose of this article is to propose a high Christology that includes the exclusivity of Jesus Christ while remaining true to the concerns of postmodernity and pluralism. This purpose is achieved by first identifying two scholars who present low Christologies: Roger Haight and John Caputo in section 1. This section identifies Haight's and Caputo's foci on faith, plurality, and power that leads to a discussion of the relationship between plurality and absolute truth in a postmodern setting in section 2. Section 3 completes this article by expanding the idea of absolute truth in a high Christology that takes into account postmodern concerns while rejecting low-Christological deviations. This work results in a Christology that accounts for Haight's and Caputo's concerns about plurality and the postmodern idea of truth(s) while upholding traditional orthodoxy. Such a Christology leads to the following conclusions: (1) postmodernism is correct because unbelievers cannot know absolute truth due to the fall as noted in Genesis 3; (2) Christians, however, know absolute truth in Jesus Christ but struggle to fully grasp this truth due to humanity's sinful nature; (3) only in the eschaton will all of humanity fully grasp absolute truth.



I. Assessing the Christological Methods of Roger Haight and John Caputo

Roger Haight and John Caputo work from diverse backgrounds. Haight was a Catholic priest who sought to bridge the gap between the church and postmodernism by working through a “theology of the symbol.”¹ However, through his work, he ran afoul of the church for his proposals. Caputo was a philosopher in the vein of Jacques Derrida. He proposed a “religion without religion” inspired by the idea of an “impudent figure of an atheistic Jewish Augustine.”² Caputo focused on the event of a powerless Jesus. Haight and Caputo make these arguments based on concerns about plurality and human finitude.

In response to Haight and Caputo, a third scholar, Jean-Pierre Fortin argued, “In Jesus Christ, Caputo’s philosophy of the event and Haight’s theology of the symbol can be meaningfully integrated and human finitude responsibly overcome.”³ He does so by proposing a high Christology can hold that Jesus chooses to be powerless so he might call humanity to himself in love.

The work here extends this discussion by asking whether a postmodern Christology can remain orthodox while addressing Haight and Caputo’s concerns of plurality and human finitude. To answer that question, Section I provides a summary and assessment of Haight and Caputo’s arguments. Section II visits the idea of truth within postmodernism. Section III then introduces a high Christology whereby Jesus is absolute truth within a postmodern approach that takes the concerns of plurality and human finitude seriously.

1. Roger Haight. Haight argues in his 1999 book *Jesus, Symbol of God* that four loci exist from which theology is built. Of the four, the locus focused on here is faith. Haight argues that faith is “a universal form of human experience” and represents an “existential human response” to whatever spiritual event is occurring.⁴ Consequently, faith is not dependent upon biblical authority because the “mere citation of scripture as testimony to a

¹ Jean-Pierre Fortin, “Symbolism in Weakness: Jesus Christ for the Postmodern Age,” *HeyJ* 58.1 (January 2017), 64. Fortin’s work in this article was instrumental in helping identify and present the information in section I.

² John Caputo, “Return of Anti-Religion” *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* 11 (2011): 35.

³ Fortin, “Symbolism in Weakness,” 64.

⁴ Roger Haight, *Jesus, Symbol of God* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1999), 2.



past belief, by itself, bears little weight for belief today.”⁵ Instead, biblical authority derives from the interaction between reader and text, or, in Haight’s words, from “experiential faith and revelatory encounter.”⁶ As such, the role of Scripture is that of “symbolic mediation.”⁷ Unfortunately, this also means Christology derives solely from experiential faith and personal encounters with the divine. People, therefore, fill their experience of the transcendent with individual meanings. Consequently, they meet a symbolic Jesus who is not bound to the biblical text.⁸

In Haight’s view, Jesus’s death also lacked salvific force, and his resurrection “can only be apprehended in faith.”⁹ Therefore, knowledge of God occurs through Jesus, who is a human symbol, but no text binds the meaning of this symbol. Instead, individuals provide meaning through subjective, transcendent experiences. These experiences lead to differing understandings of Jesus, creating a plurality, and this plurality, according to Haight, “Is an element of the human condition. It is not something that will disappear or go away.”¹⁰ As such, this plurality is Haight’s lynchpin for Christology.¹¹

2. Assessing Haight. Haight is correct concerning a plurality of beliefs in Christology but moves too far by making plurality the lynchpin by which he forms his Christology.¹² He holds to this lynchpin because he believes humanity’s ability to know God is restricted to the present, and this restriction precludes any objective knowledge of God.¹³ Thus, Haight constructs his Christology through what Fortin calls “the awareness of its historical contextualization.”¹⁴ This awareness leads the Christian theologian to “accept and subsequently explain the mediation of divine grace through other religious traditions in light of the revelation of God in Jesus Christ.”¹⁵

⁵ Ibid. 12.

⁶ Ibid. 7.

⁷ Ibid. 12.

⁸ Ibid. 14; Jean-Pierre Fortin, “Symbolism in Weakness,” 71. Although to be fair, Haight proposes Jesus is the true symbolic mediator through whom a person experiences God.

⁹ Ibid. 72.

¹⁰ Roger Haight, “On Pluralism in Christology,” *Budhi* 1 (1997): 32.

¹¹ Fortin, “Symbolism in Weakness,” 69.

¹² He is correct in that many Christologies exist, but incorrect that all Christologies are equally valid.

¹³ Fortin, “Symbolism in Weakness,” 70.

¹⁴ Ibid. 69.

¹⁵ Ibid.



Here, then, is the central problem in Haight's work for those who hold a high Christology: he repudiates the exclusivity and uniqueness of Jesus without regard for the proclamations of the NT authors. Perhaps a critical summary of Haight's method is best found in Pope Benedict XVI's official notification on Haight's book, which he produced in his earlier role as Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. In it, he writes Haight propagates a theology existing in "critical correlation" between tradition and postmodern approaches, but this correlation ends with the "subordination of the content of faith to its plausibility and intelligibility in postmodern culture."¹⁶ This assessment also fits John Caputo's approach.

3. John D. Caputo. In Caputo's estimation, religion is necessary because humanity is unable to prove or disprove God's existence. However, he proposes a "religion without religion" (taken from Derrida) whereby human experience takes on religious value without an exclusive claim to truth, making absolute knowledge of God unobtainable.¹⁷ Ironically, Caputo also articulates several definitive statements about whom God should be. In Fortin words, "Caputo's God is [not] . . . an omnipotent, transcendent principle exercising providential rule over world events If there is to be belief in God, it can be only in an utterly weak one. . . . God manifests Godself as an ever-renewed self-offer summoning the addressees to self-transcendence."¹⁸ This belief underlies Caputo's entire Christological construct.

[Jesus] was crucified not as part of a grand divine design but unjustly and against his will, and if he returns we would crucify him again for meddling in the affairs of the Church. The Christianity to come would recall the figure of a Jesus who is powerless and whose claim on us is unconditional even though he has no power. That is the event that stirs within the name of Jesus.¹⁹

It is upon this Jesus that Caputo's deconstruction occurs, and the focus of this deconstruction is the traditions and theologies of Jesus as currently understood in the Christian church.²⁰

¹⁶ Joseph Ratzinger, "Notification on the Book 'Jesus Symbol of God' by Father Roger Haight S. J.," (Rome: Offices of the Congregation of Doctrine and Faith, 2004), para. 8-9.

¹⁷ John D. Caputo, *On Religion, Thinking in Action* (London: Routledge, 2001), 109-10.

¹⁸ Fortin, "Symbolism in Weakness," 67.

¹⁹ John D. Caputo, "The Power of the Powerless," in *After the Death of God* (ed. Jeffrey W. Robbins, Insurrections: Critical Studies in Religion, Politics, and Culture; New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 160.

²⁰ *Ibid.* 159.



4. Assessing Caputo. Caputo's Jesus looks like Haight's Jesus in that both have stripped him of his deity and faith is no longer a belief in the Jesus of Scripture but a belief in a religious experience of self-transcendence. This devotion to human finitude limits Caputo's Christology (and in truth, it limits Haight's as well) and makes it impossible to "decipher supernatural meaning in and through historical events and their timely succession. . . . No valid metanarrative, not even universally applicable claims can be formulated."²¹ This idea leaves a powerless Jesus understood only through human knowledge and known only when a person assesses their experience in the context of the divine. However, why must he be powerless? A Jesus who retains his power summons a person to a predefined set of truths rather than self-transcendence. Thus, for Caputo, the personhood of Jesus must remain devoid of power so that he is assessable to the plurality.

However, a Jesus devoid of the father's power and the ability to forgive sins is a low-Christology Jesus. In response, Fortin argues Jesus's powerlessness derives from his love for humanity and his choice to present himself as a sacrifice. If a person chooses to experience the divine through Jesus's love, he or she "choose[s] to be indwelled by and live from a truth [he or she] will never master,"²² but can this idea work in postmodernism? The answer centers on the idea of truth.

II. Truth within Postmodernism

The concept of truth lays at the heart of any postmodern engagement. Caputo writes in his book *What Would Jesus Deconstruct* that "deconstruction is a theory of *truth* in which truth spells *trouble*. . . ."²³ Moreover, the postmodern fascination with *untruth* is "a strategy of 'reversal' meant to expose the contingency of what we like to call the 'Truth' with a capital *T*—deconstruction being a critique of long-robed totalizers of a capitalized Truth. . . ."²⁴ What (or where) then, is truth for Caputo? He locates truth in events and calls them "tender shoots and saplings . . . which postmodern thinking must exert every effort to cultivate and

²¹ Fortin, "Symbolism in Weakness," 72-3.

²² Ibid. 76.

²³ John D. Caputo, *What Would Jesus Deconstruct? The Church and Postmodern Culture: The Good News of Postmodernism for the Church* (Grand Rapids: BakerAcademic, 2007), 30.

²⁴ Ibid.



keep safe.”²⁵ However, if truth is in the event, then what of the event of the revelation of truth? Should it not be cultivated and kept safe as well?

The event of the final revelation of truth in the Christian worldview occurred in the writing of the New Testament. The narratives of this event passed through generations of the church community until new narratives created a rupture. This rupture resulted from modernism, which taught a person finds truth not in the Bible but through applying the self to the sciences; and postmodernism, which explained truth was only an interpretation of what a person observed. Ironically, this rupture violates the postmodern belief that intervening metanarratives should not rupture any local narratives (a foundational argument in postcolonialism). Therefore, identifying truth in postmodern Christian theology means reconnecting with events recorded in the Bible as understood by the local church communities.

For a postmodern Christology, this reconnection begins with the event of the Last Supper. In it, Jesus stated, “I am the way and the truth and the life; no one comes to the father except through me. If you know me, you will also know my father” (John 14:6).²⁶ In this threefold statement, the author articulates *truth*. As such, Jesus is not a truth but rather, the truth—that is, Truth with a capital *T*. This statement by Jesus is an event, and the recording of this statement is a second event that continues the revelation.²⁷ The result of the second event

²⁵ John D. Caputo, “Spectral Hermeneutics: On the Weakness of God and the Theology of the Event,” in *After the Death of God*, 48.

²⁶ According to Caputo, all statements such as this one must be deconstructed because it is bound not to the event, but to the text related to the event. Haight and Caputo therefore have removed (or, in Derridean terms, decentered) the biblical text from the structure called Christian belief, creating a new center called Self. They then build a new structure—labeled here a *Plurality of Selves*—in which the experiences of one self is equal to the experiences of the other Self (termed hereon, *Self* and *Other*). This equality makes Self and Other interdependent as Self is defined as not being Other and Other, as not being Self. However, a true postmodern approach would not rest on a single decentered center but would continue decentering. As such, Self must be decentered to allow a true Other to exist, defined as a Nonplurality of Selves. This Nonplurality of Selves differs from the Plurality of Selves in that the Nonplurality of Selves express a unified understanding of Truth through consistent grounding within scripture and basic beliefs concerning God and Jesus. As a result, the Nonplurality of Selves is centered around the biblical text and the statements held within it. This approach still denies the long-robbed totalizers of capitalized truth as a Plurality of Selves still exists with their individual truths, but it also denies the scholastic criers of individual truth their role of totalizing through many equal truths.

²⁷ Inspiration and inerrancy are located here. Consequently, for those so inclined, inerrancy is still viable within this presentation as it, along with inspiration, constitutes the way in which the second event is completed.



is the NT, which forms the theology of the church—a third ongoing event.²⁸ Because each of these events is paramount to Christianity, a Christian postmodern perspective must protect all three like “tender shoots and saplings.” Moreover, the resurrected Christ legitimates these three events—truth no longer spells *t-r-o-u-b-l-e*, but *J-e-s-u-s*.²⁹ Interaction with this Truth (absolute truth) is interaction with the transcendent (“If you know me, you will know the father”), and it is this Truth that Fortin proclaimed indwelled humanity without humanity mastering it. Here, then, is the foundation upon which a high Christology may be built within a postmodern setting.

III. Building a High Christology

As seen in section 1, a postmodern Christology must remain faithful to the situations and experiences of the contemporary audience. This condition creates three responsibilities that form the framework for the postmodern high Christology offered here: (1) explain pluralism in light of Jesus as absolute truth, (2) identify Jesus as God’s response to broken truth in the Gospels, and (3) explore how a Christocentric message of salvation in a high Christological postmodern approach remains true to the contemporary experience while holding to the norms of a traditional high Christology.

1. Pluralism in light of Jesus as absolute truth. If Jesus is absolute truth (or, Truth with a capital *T*), then Christology must explain the gap between absolute truth and Friedrich Nietzsche’s assertion that interpretation is all that exists.³⁰ The author of Genesis provides this explanation in 2:17, “In the day you eat from [the tree of the knowledge of good and evil] you will surely die.”³¹ Kenneth Matthews, Gordon Wenham, and Victor Hamilton all understand this warning as death due to humanity’s moral choice. Matthews argues that Adam and Eve’s method of gaining knowledge meant they “expressed their independence [from] God and obtained wisdom possessed by God through moral autonomy. This

²⁸ For more on theology as the continuation of the recording event, see Kevin Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005); *First Theology: God, Scripture and Hermeneutics* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2002).

²⁹ Small t, truth now becomes capitalized Truth. The legitimation of these events in the resurrected Christ follows in the next section.

³⁰ This assertion is essential in the espousal of pluralism. In this understanding, the idea of absolute truth is replaced with individual interpretation of reality, creating individual truths for each person.

³¹ כִּי יוֹם אֲכָלְתָּ מִפְּרִי עֵץ הַדַּעַת מוֹת תָּמוּת



autonomous action meant death because this wisdom was obtained unlawfully.”³² Nahum Sarna also comes to a similar conclusion in his JPS commentary on Genesis, writing the decision created a “capacity to make independent judgments concerning human welfare.”³³ Humanity, therefore, usurped God’s role as determiners of right and wrong. Humans are now the judges of truth.

Here, then, is the birthplace of plurality—not the concept, but plurality itself. From the human perspective, there is only the local narrative: the interpretation of reality. Humanity lost objectivity in the fall. Original sin, like the oft-used illustration of a drop of dye, affected every aspect of humanity, including the very processes by which a person observes, reasons, and understands. To again use the words of Sarna, humans gained “the capacity to make independent judgments.” The same capacity shows itself today through a person’s ability to make decisions based on independent judgment. As such, from the human perspective, each person’s individual story is his or her foundation for individual truth. No two people share the same reality because no two people share the same judgment. Therefore, to believe Truth is obtainable from a human perspective is to discount humanity’s total depravity. From this perspective, Nietzsche, Haight, and Caputo are correct because humanity took the role of the final arbiter of truth in the Garden of Eden.

This perspective then leads to another question. Is Truth lost to humanity for all time? No. God responded to this broken truth when Jesus, in whom was truth, “became flesh and dwelt among us” (John 1:14, 14:6).

2. High Christology and pluralism: Jesus as God’s response to broken truth.

Jesus is God’s response to broken truth. John writes in his Gospel the truth came through Jesus (1:17) and was testified as such by John the Baptist (5:33). Moreover, it is through Jesus that humanity comes to know truth (8:32), and even more importantly, Jesus is the truth (14:6). Thus, in a postmodern high Christology, the incarnate God is also the inbreaking of

³² Kenneth A. Mathews, *Genesis 1-11:26*, NAS 1a (Nashville: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 1996), 205; Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, WBC vol. 1 (Dallas: Word, 1998), 63; Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis, Chapters 1-17*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1990), 166; idem, “Genesis,” in *The Baker Illustrated Bible Commentary*, (ed. Garry M. Burge and Andrew E. Hill; Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2012), 11.

³³ Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis בראשית*, The JPS Torah Commentary (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 19.



the divine absolute—capital *T* Truth—into human plurality as Truth “became flesh and dwelled among us” (1:14). However, humanity failed to recognize the Truth and his testimony.

John exemplifies this failure in 18:37–38. After Pilate questions Jesus, Jesus responds he came into the world to bear witness to the truth and that everyone who is of the truth listens to him. This response leads to a poignant moment in the narrative. Pilate asks, “What is truth?” but Jesus remains silent. That silence condemns Pilate in that he fails to see Truth even as the incarnate Truth stands before him; he fails to hear Truth’s voice even as Truth speaks directly to him. Pilate’s failure occurs because he chose to be the determiner of his truth. This idea is noted by Sherri Brown in the *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, “Pilate . . . rejects the possibility of truth and refuses to recognize the revelation of God in Jesus.”³⁴

In this narrative, Pilate becomes more than just a procurator; he is now the picture of humanity confronted with a single question. Will humanity accept what they have heard about the king (the context of Pilate’s discussion with Jesus)? To recognize Jesus as such is to abdicate the throne and allow Jesus to become the arbiter of reality, that is, to permit Capital *T* Truth to be king in the local narrative of an individual life. Conversely, to remain silent or to reject Jesus leads to crucifying Truth and opting for Self as arbiter.

This decision also begets a new meaning for the crucifix. It is now the symbol of humanity’s continued desire to reject Truth in a high postmodern Christology. It is the symbol of plurality and dead universal narratives. Self has become king and has crucified Truth. This Self lives on Saturday, the day between Truth’s death and his resurrection. It is the abode of the unregenerate human nature where a Plurality of Selves created by sin in the Garden reigns supreme.³⁵ From this perspective, there is no God because the Plurality of Selves crucified him.

³⁴ Sherri Brown, “What Is Truth? Jesus, Pilate, and the Staging of the Dialogue of the Cross in John 18:28-19:16a,” *CBQ* 77 (2015): 77.

³⁵ See footnote 26 for a better understanding of the Plurality of Selves.



Alan Lewis argues western culture has dwelled in this horrible Saturday since the Enlightenment, a day he calls a “cold, dark Sabbath” and “a day of atheism.”³⁶ However, it is not only the Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment west but all of humanity that dwells in this cold, dark Sabbath. It is in this day of atheism that Haight and Caputo write their Christology, and why their Christologies fail. They speak of the resurrection but without the ability to experience it. Consequently, since faith is experiential in their theologies, the resurrection exists only as a symbol open to interpretation. Therefore, the plurality of Selves living on Saturday between Jesus’s death and resurrection fills this symbol with human understanding from their own so-called transcendent experiences.

Such experiences, however, lack Truth because Truth incarnate has yet to resurrect. Instead, the individuals who make up the Plurality of Selves are bound to interpret their experiences by their own understanding. Consequently, the message of salvation in a Postmodern Christology is a call out of atheist Saturday into Resurrection Sunday. It is a call to redemption based on the same beliefs found in traditional orthodoxy but focused and narrativized for a postmodern world.

3. High Christology and pluralism: the Christocentric message of salvation and traditional evangelical doctrine.

On Resurrection Sunday, the empty tomb symbolizes dethroned Self and the death of plurality. To pass into Sunday means stepping back into Friday and recognizing Jesus as the substitution for sin; sin being any thought, action, or word that hurts one’s relationship with God (such as choosing to replace God as the determiner of truth in one’s life). Self is crucified with Jesus on Friday and experiences the transcendent through the resurrection of Jesus on Sunday. This experience confirms the narrative of Jesus as found in the Scriptures, and the universal narrative—the story God is telling—is again available. A postmodern Christology recognizes this story as absolute truth, which is available to every Christian: “When the spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth” (John 16:13), but Absolute Truth is available only to the Christian: “I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counselor to be with you forever, He is the spirit of truth. The world is unable to

³⁶ Alan E. Lewis, *Between Cross and Resurrection: A Theology of Holy Saturday* (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, 2001), 56, 236.



receive him because it does not see him or know him, but you do know him because he remains with you and will be in you” (John 14:16–17). Therefore, Christians should expect that the world will not accept Absolute Truth. Moreover, while the Christian is justified before God and is a new creation, the new Self must also keep in mind that justification does not equal glorification.

Although justified, the Christian is still tainted by original sin until the day of glorification. Thus, while a Christian experiences absolute truth in Jesus, he or she cannot clearly see Absolute Truth in this world because the Christian still retains a sinful nature (Rom 7:14–25). It is only in glorification that Absolute truth will be grasped absolutely, or as Paul says, “We see through a glass darkly, but then, face to face; now I know in part, but then shall I know even as also I am known” (1 Cor 13:12). Nevertheless, the Holy Spirit—that is, the Spirit of Truth—continues to work in the Christian and call the non-Christian to leave the “cold dark Sabbath,” that “day of atheism” and step into the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who is truth incarnate. In this way, the postmodern Christocentric message of salvation still conforms to the doctrines of evangelical Christianity while remaining true to postmodern concerns.

IV. Conclusion

In conclusion, Haight and Caputo fail in their theology because they begin and end with humanity as the ultimate arbiter of truth. In contrast, the postmodern Christology proposed here begins by identifying the current state of pluralism and why it exists. The fall in the Garden of Eden elevated each person to the position of ultimate arbiter of truth for their reality, and the result of original sin is still in effect today. Therefore, in the world that currently exists, there is no absolute truth at the human level, and there will continue to be no absolute truth in this life for all who are outside Jesus Christ. That does not mean, however, that absolute truth does not exist. Absolute truth became flesh and dwelled in this world, but the Plurality of Selves rejected and crucified him. Therefore, this plurality currently lives in atheist Saturday, the day in which God is dead. However, Truth resurrected on Sunday, and he now calls into atheist Saturday through the Spirit of Truth, beckoning humanity to experience the Friday crucifixion and Sunday resurrection through him. Consequently, when



a person answers this call, he or she experiences the transcendent and comes to know Truth as Jesus Christ.

Although now justified before God, the Christian still carries the effects of the choice to replace God as ultimate arbiter (original sin); there is still no observation without interpretation in this life, which still leads to a plurality as truth as individually understood. Therefore, the Christian hope lays in the eschaton where glorification ends the Christian's divided nature. Only there can Truth be comprehended in full. Until then, the Christian is responsible for representing Truth through the help of the Spirit of Truth in a world that still lives in atheist Saturday; a world in which individual truths have reigned supreme since the fall of Adam and Eve. This representation occurs by exemplifying Jesus in every element of life so that others may know Truth and in him, experience both Crucifixion Friday and Resurrection Sunday.

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