

# WHO DO YOU SAY THAT I AM? : THE JESUS QUESTION AT CATHOLIC UNIVERSITIES AND COLLEGES

Glenn Ambrose  
University of the Incarnate Word

## *Abstract*

*The question concerning the identity and message of Jesus of Nazareth is fundamentally important for Catholic universities and colleges. This has always been true, but today's pluralistic and ecumenical setting presses us to think in new ways. This essay draws attention to two types of Christologies, one from "above" and one from "below," that have been a part of the Christian tradition and examines their viability in contemporary Christian faith-based education. In conclusion, it is argued that a Christology from Below, which rejects theological claims concerning the divine identity of Jesus as a starting point in favor of beginning with the fullness of his humanity, is better suited for Catholic universities. Such an approach to understanding the identity and message of Jesus preserves the interrogative value of the incarnation, has a more universal appeal, helps articulate a true humanism and is most relevant to the generation coming of age.*

And Jesus went on with his disciples, to the villages of Caesarea Philippi and on the way he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" And they told him, "John the Baptist; and others say, Elijah; and others one of the prophets." And he asked them, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answered him, "You are the Christ." And he charged them to tell no one about him. (Mark 8:27-30)

If in fact Mark records here an actual historical exchange between Jesus and Peter, then Peter, from the perspective of Mark's community, gives the right answer. But we may legitimately doubt that Peter understood what he said at this point. His behavior at the time of Jesus' arrest (denial of even knowing Jesus) and immediately after the crucifixion (hiding) suggests his concept of the Messiah did not correspond with a crucified Christ. This text, which raises the question of the identity of Jesus, continues to challenge every generation to discern the meaning and message of this man from Nazareth. When it comes to identifying Jesus, each of us has in all likelihood inherited multiple names for Jesus. But as the passage from Mark above shows, having the right name by itself is not enough. The various names or titles for Jesus all carry with them a particular meaning or in many cases multiple meanings. It is these particular meanings that require our attention and understanding when considering who Jesus is and what he represents to our current age.

"But who do you say that I am?" (Mk. 8:29) If Jesus were to put this question to a contemporary theologian such as myself, I could invite him to any number of lectures in my classes in which I discuss different theological perspectives on Jesus formulated through the ages. Or I could give him an answer based on the latest historical evidence that is shedding light on his identity as a first century Jew. However, I suspect, if I were to do so, Jesus' reply would be, "So what? Who do YOU say that I am?" The Jesus question is more than a historical question and more than a theological question. It is, as

Cox (2001) has argued, an existential question. Even today, in our supposedly secular culture, Jesus continues to provoke an existential response from both believers and unbelievers.

I have in my office a large illustrated version of a well-known book written by Pelican (1997) that explores dominant images of Jesus Christ through the centuries. Seeing the artful renditions of Jesus along with the various titles given Jesus, such as Jesus the Rabbi, King of Kings, Son of Man, Christ Crucified, Prince of Peace, Liberator, Sacrificial Lamb, Son of God, Son of Mary, and Jesus as Mother makes me wonder how they could all possibly be accurately referring to one person. As I see it, there are two primary reasons why multiple titles, even contrasting ones, have been required throughout history to speak of Jesus. First, the person of Jesus possesses an inexhaustible depth of meaning. No one title can possibly disclose the identity of Jesus in his fullness. For that reason, it is best to think of these titles for Jesus as metaphors. As metaphors they attempt to disclose something about Jesus, but no one image fully captures the depth of meaning contained in Jesus' life and death. Thus, the Christian tradition needs, and in fact has always had, multiple metaphors for describing the central figure of its faith. Second, the historicity of the human condition along with the dynamics of cultural and historical change demand a continuous process of piling on metaphor after metaphor. This development of new names for Jesus is necessary if we are to address the identity of Jesus in a culturally relevant and meaningful way. It should be noted that the process of naming Jesus in a variety of ways began right from start. The four Gospels of Jesus along with numerous other early Christian writings, most of which do not have canonical status, demonstrate both the existence of many names for Jesus and the need for critically evaluating these names. Today, we continue and must continue our quest to discover and name Jesus. This process gives testimony to what Christians have always proclaimed, namely, "Christ is Risen!" Christ continues to speak, to question, and to goad the human community towards living in conformity with the Reign of God. However, how we understand this Jesus and how we draw attention to him in Catholic higher education can either hinder or encourage this process.

Obviously, addressing the identity and call of Jesus is a very personal question, but it is also an important question to consider collectively as a Christian faith-based institution. The mission statement at the University of the Incarnate Word draws attention to commitment to education in the context of faith in Jesus Christ. What does this mean? Who is this Jesus that we place our faith in? What marks does he leave on the University? And how might we bring Jesus into the classroom?

In this brief essay, I will first draw attention to a contemporary approach in Christology that is especially suited to the mission of Catholic higher education in a pluralistic world. This is meant to address the question, who is this Jesus that we place our faith in? Following this I will share with you my thoughts about bringing Jesus into the classroom.

The orthodox doctrinal formula for expressing the identity of Jesus states that Jesus is fully human and fully divine.<sup>1</sup> Any theology about Jesus that is to be regarded as orthodox must maintain this paradox of two natures in one person. However, the various titles that have been given to Jesus through the centuries often reveal an emphasis on one of the two natures of Christ. Titles such as Rabbi, Liberator, *el niño Jesus*, Jesus, my brother, Son of Mary, and even early New Testament titles such as Christ, Son of Man and Son of God when understood in their original Jewish context, leave us with the impression of a very human Jesus. On the other hand, titles such as *Logos*, Cosmic Christ, Second Person in the Trinity and even Incarnate Word leave the opposite impression.

This latter perspective on Jesus that emphasizes his divine nature has been more dominant. There are a host of factors that have led to a focus on Jesus' divinity, the most innocent of which and most commonsensical is no doubt related to the essentially non-controversial nature of the assertion that Jesus is human. Jesus after all is born, he eats and drinks and of course he dies. The more radical claim is that this person is God. It is then only natural that when Christians speak of Jesus, the titles and names attributed to him will more often than not speak loudly and clearly of his divine nature.

In the 20th century, Rahner was one of the first to draw attention to two types of Christologies: a Christology from Below and a Christology from Above (Rahner, 1975). Both Christologies can be fully orthodox, but they represent two different methodological starting points. A Christology from Above, which has essentially been the dominant approach since the time of the Patristic Period (2nd to 5th centuries), begins its reflection on the identity of Jesus with authoritative pronouncements of revealed doctrine. Of course, years ago this is how all theology was done; it was called Dogmatic Theology. You began with what was essentially understood to be supernaturally revealed doctrine, which you accepted simply as a matter of faith, and then you used reason to help better understand doctrine. Note that this method utilizes both faith and reason, but in the relationship between the two, reason was significantly crippled (i.e., hardly ever a critical reason) and faith was often misplaced as faith in institutional authority to pronounce doctrine. Dogmatic Christology, which can be seen as one form of Christology from Above, traditionally began with thinking of Jesus first as the eternal *Logos* incarnated (e.g., the Gospel of John) or as the Second Person of the Trinity. In other words, one begins here with what is assumed to be divinely revealed knowledge concerning the essence of God prior to even thinking about Jesus as a historical person and human being. You then know Jesus is God because you see divine attributes in him: he forgave sins, he calmed a storm, he walked on water, he raised a person from the dead, and of course, he was resurrected.

---

<sup>1</sup> The Council of Chalcedon in 451 C.E. articulated an understanding of the relationship between the divinity and humanity in Jesus that has been regarded as normative for most Christian communities in both the East and West. It did not specify a single model for understanding this relationship but rather asserted that an orthodox Christology must affirm that Jesus is truly human and truly divine. The doctrinal expression coming out of this council should be regarded as functioning as a negative norm in that it specifies clear boundaries for orthodoxy but remains open to a number of Christologies that attempt to explain this relationship in a more precise manner.

Haight (2001, p. 29) refers to this theology as a descending Christology. Its method follows the pattern of the incarnation itself - from God to humanity. Not surprisingly, the incarnation is construed as an unimaginable miracle because conventional wisdom associates transcendence, perfection, impassibility, and all-mighty power with divine nature. How can this God become united with mortal flesh and enter a world characterized by change and corruption? One sees here why Kierkegaard argued that many Christians find something offensive about the Incarnation. Indeed, the scandal of the incarnation has always troubled the Christian tradition, from Docetists in the early Church who argued that God merely took on the appearance of being human in Jesus to students in my classroom today who will not entertain the possibility that Jesus spiritually grew in his lifetime or that Jesus was not omniscient. The greatest obstacle to seeing Jesus as fully human is typically our image of God. And the Achilles' heel of a Christology from Above is the preconceived image of God that shapes its response to the Jesus question. The response has often failed to fully appreciate the humanity of Jesus.

Rahner contrasts this approach to a Christology from below, which in fact has been more dominant in contemporary theology. There are several factors that have come together at once to give rise to this kind of Christology which may be thought of as a non-Dogmatic Christology because it insists on starting its reflection with the full humanity of Jesus and never loses sight of the Jesus of history. Briefly, some of the factors are: first, the contemporary acceptance of a more immanent image of God, a God who even suffers: given the horrors of 20th century, would any other kind of God be deemed worthy of our devotion?; second, globalization and the intimate encounter with other religions which have made dogmatic differences between Christian denominations less significant (witness the non-denominational church movement) and the humanity of Jesus more significant, especially in the case of interreligious dialogue; and third, the modern tools and resources of the disciplines of biblical studies, history and archeology which have truly made the historical quest for Jesus a viable and fruitful enterprise for the first time. We have accumulated more knowledge about Jesus' lifetime in the past 50 years than in the previous 1500 years. Together these factors and others no doubt have made a Christology from Below more appealing and constructive.

Christology from Below begins its reflection with this man who is, in Pauline Christology, like us in all ways except sin.<sup>2</sup> This is an ascending Christology which in fact is truer to the actual experience of Jesus' followers. In their encounter with the humanity of Jesus, they came to experience nothing less than the fullness of God. This perspective that begins with the humanity of Jesus still preserves the scandal and miracle of the Incarnation. However, it presents it differently. It is not primarily about the image of God. The God of the Bible had never been a distant God. Yahweh was intimately involved in human affairs. From this point of view, the Incarnation is intelligible, perhaps even predictable. Has not God always been present and active in history? From this perspective, the Incarnation could be taken to represent a more complete and decisive inbreaking of God in the world. This leaves us with the possibility that the scandalous nature of the incarnation is tied to the image of humanity, not the image of God. In other words, maybe what is behind being offended by the Incarnation -- and this is really

---

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Romans 5:12-21 for Paul's view of Jesus as the New Adam.

Kierkegaard's point -- is not so much what it says about God and God's relationship to us, but rather what it says about us and our relationship to God (Rigby, 2005, p. 184). In other words, the offense taken in thinking of God as becoming fully human really conceals a reluctance to bear the good news of this event. After all, the Incarnation says much more than simply that God stands before us; it says God has embraced us totally by becoming one of us. And this embrace is the embrace of all of humanity which is powerfully signified by the fact that the decisive inbreaking of God occurs in a person who is not some superhero, prince, Caesar, or otherwise extraordinary person, but rather an ordinary oppressed peasant living in a colonized land. Note also that in Jesus' ministry, the only people that he can embrace are the ones who come near, the ones in fact that are not offended by his humanity and the company he keeps. Those who build walls of separation and excommunicate for the sake of purity may actually cut themselves off from communion with the divine.

A Christology from Below also has its Achilles' heel, namely, the historical Jesus that is its methodological starting point. There is what Lessing called "the ugly ditch between faith and history" (McGrath, 2001, p. 385). With all the challenges that come with historical re-constructions, can we really find the Jesus of history with any reliable degree of certainty? Every new book on the historical Jesus may help us find what we are looking for, but are we finding what was really there? In the one Jesus Seminar<sup>3</sup> event I attended, I was struck by the fact that most of the participants were baby boomers. I could not help but wonder if their anti-institutional image of Jesus as a radical non-violent social protestor was simply a reflection of their longing for the days of their lost youth. It seems that a Christology from Below can potentially be just as dogmatic as a Christology from Above.

I have introduced these two Christologies because it presents us with two options for responding to our question. Both are legitimate paths, but I would argue seeing Jesus from Below, from the perspective of his humanity, is better suited for the current setting of Catholic universities and colleges. First, this perspective preserves the interrogative value and mystery of the Incarnation. Jesus should provoke in Christians and non-Christians alike existential questions about our ultimate values and our identity as human beings. A Christology from Above, especially one dogmatically presented, is too comfortable with answers. Consequently, it discourages or excessively restricts the necessary and ongoing work of resymbolization that individuals, cultures and societies must engage in. In other words, it too easily shields us from having to honestly confront and answer the perennial and personal question that Jesus poses in Mark 8:27-30.

Second, Jesus, as someone who is fully human, is universally relevant. Every human being can learn something from another human being. Cox gives us the example of Ghandi who found inspiration and truth in Jesus *apart from faith in his divine nature* (Cox, 2001, p. 95). If we take seriously the idea that Jesus is fully divine and fully human, then his revelatory value lies not just in what he tells us about God, but also what

---

<sup>3</sup> The Jesus Seminar is a group of mostly biblical scholars mainly interested in developing an accurate portrait of the historical Jesus. Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan are two of the most widely published authors in this group.

he tells us about human nature (i.e., about us). In other words, his revelatory value extends well beyond those who share faith in Christianity's faith-based theological assertions concerning his divine nature. In a religiously pluralistic environment, Jesus' humanity acts as a common ground, and a Christology from Below has the advantage of both beginning there and *offering the possibility of ascending to an understanding of Jesus' divine nature*. This latter advantage is important for those who would still see evangelization, in the sense of conversion to Christianity, to be an important aspect of the mission of a Catholic university. But note, this would be conversion by way of invitation, not indoctrination. Those who would argue that we must actively and directly encourage faith in Jesus' divinity in the classroom might in fact be showing a kind of lack of faith in the power of Jesus' witness. Furthermore, if this sequence of events from Jesus' humanity to the recognition of his divinity was good enough for Jesus' first followers, it ought to be recognized as a legitimate path today for Catholic universities and other pluralistic settings.

Third, Jesus' humanity is a solid foundation for the articulation of a humanism, especially in the Catholic intellectual tradition. In the past, humanism has often been seen as the preferred rational alternative to religion. The modern humanist was pitted against the theist. But in light of the Catholic view of creation and incarnation, any true humanism is at least implicitly religious in character. And I would argue that the Catholic University has, as part of its mission, the duty to articulate and foster a true humanism. An education in the context of faith in Jesus Christ should lead us to a humanism that is marked by Jesus' humanity. Most importantly, we cannot neglect the fact that Jesus reveals a particular way of being human that is especially attentive to the injustice, misery, suffering and oppression that is a reality in our world. A Christology from Below reminds us that it is never enough to simply be a believer in Christian doctrine about Jesus. One expresses true faith in Jesus by trusting and believing in his Way. Thus, a Christian humanism is shaped by its commitment to follow Jesus in his concern for the marginalized and oppressed. A Roman Catholic University ought to faithfully explore what it means to be a *follower* of the way of Jesus and invite members of its community, both Christians and non-Christians, to respond to Jesus' existential question (who do you say that I am?) in their own ways.

Lastly, a Christology from Below is the most relevant approach for the generation coming of age. We should celebrate the thirst for Jesus expressed in our contemporary culture and seize it as an opportunity to discuss the way of Jesus, rather than be distressed by Dan Brown's *Da Vinci Code* or the incredible pluralism of images of Jesus, some of which are shockingly unorthodox, that are entertained today. After all, I would rather have students that are searching in my classroom, than students with all the answers.

In conclusion, who is this Jesus that I try to bring into the classroom? For me, Jesus is an enduring and normative symbol of God and humanity *in action*. I have placed my faith in *the Way* of Jesus. The Jesus I bring into the classroom is not a Dogmatic Christ of Faith that has all the answers, but rather the Jesus that poses what I believe to be the right questions that can set us on the Way. In the classroom, I try to let Jesus speak for himself and encourage my students to address in their own words the questions he and his way of

life put to us today. That, I believe, is essential to education in the context of faith in Jesus Christ in the pluralistic setting in which we find ourselves here at the University of the Incarnate Word.

### References

Brown, D. (2003). *The DaVinci code*. New York: Doubleday.

Cox, H. (2001). *Jesus and generation x*. In Borg, M. (Ed.), *Jesus at 2000* (pp.89-105). New York: Westview Press.

Haight, R. (2001). *Jesus. symbol of God*. New York: Maryknoll.

Kierkegaard, S. (1983). *The Sickness unto death*. Trans. E. Hong & H. Hong. Princeton: NJ: Princeton.

McGrath, A. (2001). *Christian theology: An introduction*. Malden: MA: Blackwell.

Pelican, J. (1997). *The illustrated Jesus through the centuries*. New Haven: CT: Yale.

Rahner, K. (1975). Two basic types of christology. In *Theological Investigations*, volume 13. New York: Seabury Press.

Rigby, C. (2005). The scandal of particularity. In Jones, S. & Lakeland, P. (Eds.) *Constructive theology: A contemporary approach to classical themes*. (pp. 84-88). Minneapolis: MN: Fortress.

The New Oxford Annotated Bible with Apocrypha (1977).