

excerpts from

“CHRISTOLOGY” – from [*A New Handbook of Christian Theology*](#) (1996)

by **MONIKA K. HELLWIG** (see bio below)

At the center of the Christian faith is the person of Jesus of Nazareth, and Christology is essentially the explanation for this. Christology deals with questions about who Jesus is and about why he makes the decisive difference in human destiny. There are some christological issues about which all Christian traditions and denominations are agreed, and others that divide the various churches.

Positions on which there is agreement among all Christian traditions are these: Jesus of Nazareth was a real human being, a first-century Palestinian Jew, who was reared in Nazareth of Galilee in a devout family, and trained to be a carpenter. He left home as a young man to take up a wandering life as a preacher and healer, and came into conflict with the religious authorities and under suspicion of the Roman colonial occupation. Knowingly risking arrest and execution for the sake of his message and mission, he was arrested, tried, and cruelly executed, but raised from the dead to a new life that has provided enlightenment and empowerment for his followers ever since. Jesus is savior; he stands in a unique relationship to the transcendent God.

Some important questions are not answered uniformly by all Christian traditions: What is meant by the claim that Jesus is divine? Did he himself make that claim before his death and resurrection? Does any divinity claim apply to his whole life from the first moment of his human existence, or does it refer to the time after his resurrection from the dead? Does the divinity claim begin with his baptism by John in the Jordan, or is it in some sense progressively realized? Is he the savior of all who are in good faith or only of those who explicitly acknowledge him as savior? And finally, in quite recent times, is he the definitive and only savior given for all peoples at all times, or might there be other saviors for other peoples and cultures?

The claim that Jesus saves is basic to the whole structure of Christology, and it assumes that there is something very wrong from which all human beings need to be saved. The Hebrew scriptures (beginning with Genesis 3) describe what is wrong as an estrangement from God that causes confusion in all aspects of human life and relationships, requiring new intervention of God the creator to restore the balance and focus. The New Testament, particularly in the letters of Paul, makes the claim that moral law and religious observances have never been enough to accomplish this restoration, but that in the person, life, teaching, death, and resurrection of Jesus there has been a radical reversal of the fate of the human community. Those who first proclaimed this did so on the grounds of their own experience of radical change for the better in their lives as individuals and as communities. For all subsequent Christians, who were brought to faith in Jesus Christ by the testimony of others, it has been important to ask why Jesus makes this radical difference.

One approach is through the theme of Adam in the Genesis story of creation and sin: Jesus is the "new Adam" who by the provident will of God assumes the corporate identity of the human race, and in that identity reverses the disobedience of Adam by his own perfect obedience to the will of the heavenly Father and creator of all. This approach describes the identity of Jesus with reference to the human race and its history, acknowledges the full humanity of Jesus, and simply does not need to address the divinity claim. Another approach is through the theme of Messiah, the anointed of God, promised as savior and champion in God's name to redeem God's people as promised in the Hebrew scriptures. This is the origin of the name "Christ," from the Greek term meaning anointed. Christians have given the concept of messiah a more specific and univocal meaning than it had in Hebrew tradition. However, by using this term, Christian preaching was able to suggest both a mediating function for Jesus between God and the human community and a mysterious identity for Jesus, placing him above the ordinary human sphere and calling for reverence and worship. This approach defines the identity of Jesus in a dynamic way in relation to human history as seen by the Hebrew tradition, and it avoids an ontological or essential definition of his identity. It casts a certain aura of divinity about him without having to define exactly what that means.

A third approach, one that has caused great arguments and divisions among Christians, defines Jesus as uniquely and essentially the Son of God, one with God from eternity, sent from the Father into the world and its history to assume a human life. This approach is found in a poetic, suggestive way in the New Testament in the writings of John, especially in the prologue to John's Gospel. Jesus is identified in John as having an existence prior to his human life—a preexistence as the Word, the speaking or uttered thought by which God created in the beginning. That speaking or thought is something that is always with God and is God, but that speaking has now been realized, made concrete, enfolded in a particular human being. The letters of John suggest a parallel in the thought that God is essentially love, that Jesus is wholly love in his attitude to the Father and in his relationship to other human beings, and that Jesus is therefore an incarnation or personification of the love of God. Sooner or later, however, this approach is bound to raise questions about what exactly is meant by equating Jesus with the Word, Wisdom, Image, or Love of God, and by adding that Word, Wisdom, Image, and Love of God are God and not other realities outside God. That, in turn, raises the question how there can be two who are the one God, which led historically not only to a highly developed Christology, but also to the inclusion of the Holy Spirit or Breath of God, and to the development of a trinitarian theology.

Some Christians regard the divinity terms used in relation to Jesus as courtesy titles, not intended to be taken literally. The Arian controversy that was settled at the Council of Nicea in 325 C.E. left the majority of the churches with a commitment to take the divinity of Jesus literally; those who did not agree were labeled Arian heretics. The majority, however, faced further questions about how one individual could be at the same time divine and human. One obvious possibility is that we are speaking not exactly of a double personal identity, but of a very close union of another sort. For instance, we might think of Jesus as essentially a human person, so wholly attuned to God's will in everything that his presence is in effect the presence of God, and his impact on the world in effect the Word or utterance of God. Again, however, representatives of the then existing churches (local rather than denominational in definition) met in council at Ephesus in 431 C.E. to discuss a proposal to this effect, and vehemently rejected it, forcing those who still held this explanation into schism from the other churches, and designating them Nestorians. Most Christian churches today accept the authority of that council and therefore are committed to the explanation that Jesus is personally and literally divine.

Of course, anyone who thinks about the matter carefully has to probe further: If Jesus is personally and literally divine, is he really a human being like the rest of us, or is he really a divine being appearing to us as a man so that we might see him and relate to him? Or is he perhaps a divine being somehow expressing himself in a human body but not really subject to our limitations? For instance, did Jesus really suffer? Were there things he did not know? Did he have to consider situations, think about them, pray about them, and struggle to come to a decision? Or did the divine fullness of being, omnipotence, and omniscience preclude all this? That certainly is a very important set of questions because these issues relate immediately to what we understand by redemption and how we see our own role in accepting and responding to the divine initiative in redemption. Here again, Christians today are heirs of an answer given long ago. In 451 C.E., representatives of the churches still in communion with one another gathered at Chalcedon and hammered out a formula that was supposed to answer these persistent questions: There is one person, Jesus, who is truly of the same being as God the Father and creator in his divine aspect and truly of the same being as we are in his human aspect; when Jesus acts it is always God acting and man acting. Almost all the Christian churches still consider this the orthodox formula of Christian faith.

Nevertheless, many ordinary believers, preachers, and theologians wonder whether the Chalcedonian formula is adequate to describe the nature of Jesus. For example: If Jesus acts simultaneously as God and man, and invariably does the Father's will, can he seriously be said to have a human will at all? If as God he knows everything, does he really have a human mind that learns things progressively? And so on. To all such questions the considered answer of the churches after debate and reflection has always been: Whatever is integral to being human must also be predicated of Jesus. Contemporary Christian scholars have pointed out that the formula of Chalcedon with its subsequently agreed corollaries is not so much an answer that rationally explains the nature of Jesus, but rather is an

answer that suggests a way of accommodating a mystery that we can know in some sense but never fully comprehend.

A good question, of course, is why there should need to be such concern and endless debate on this topic. Over the centuries various authors have given answers to the question of Jesus' dual nature that still hold today, and others that we find quite strange. From Athanasius of the fourth century, we get the answer, gathered from many voices in the earlier tradition, that what we see in Jesus is a kind of exchange whereby the divine enters into our experience and our problems, providing a point of entry at which we might in turn come to share the clarity and power of the divine life, which offers the resolution of our problems. If Jesus were not truly divine and truly human at the same time then this exchange would not be open to us. From Anselm, around the year 1100, we get a different answer that has been very influential in the past, although it does not appeal to most Christians today: Jesus had to be divine to be truly the savior because what we needed to be redeemed from was the wrath of God, who in infinite majesty had been infinitely offended by sin and therefore could only be appropriately compensated by obedience and worship of infinite value, such as could be offered only by one who was truly divine and truly human.

In twentieth-century Christian theology, there has been a strong tendency to return to the Gospels and other early testimonies. The exclusively "descending" style of Christology (beginning with dogmatic formulations declaring the divinity of Jesus and then fitting his humanity and the facts of his earthly life into the picture) has come under heavy criticism, first of all because it moves from the unknown (the being of God) to the known, which is bad method, and second, because it takes a later stage of development in Christian doctrine as the starting point, and tends to read those later positions back into the earlier sources, which is also bad method. Today's Christology has insisted on ascending approaches (those which begin with our knowledge of what it is to be human and with the available testimonies about the human life of Jesus and then consider what it might mean to speak of this man as divine), because biblical, historical, and patristic scholarship offers us much better access to the historical Jesus and his society, culture, and religious circumstances than was available for most of the Christian centuries, and also because recent philosophies such as existentialism, phenomenology, and process thought have opened up methods of reflection better suited to an ascending approach than were the classical philosophies. Since these possibilities have been opened up, attention in Christology has turned to some questions that did not really come into focus before. One of these is how the death of Jesus is the outcome of the choices and decisions he made in his life, and what that tells us about his own understanding of salvation and of the process of redemption in the history of the world. In a descending Christology it was easy to assume that the death of Jesus was redemptive because the Father had decreed it in eternity and therefore it constituted the infinitely valuable radical act of obedience that turned the scales. An ascending Christology does not claim to know what the Father decrees in eternity, but painstakingly looks for clues in the recorded sayings and doings of Jesus in the framework of the known hopes and convictions of the Jewish people at that time in order to try to understand why Jesus concluded that he had to pursue a path that would provoke his early arrest.

Along the same lines, present approaches to Christology question whether Jesus really intended to found a new religion—Christianity—or actually intended to uncover the core of Judaism. A related question asks why a ministry that was in Jesus' lifetime entirely confined to Israel is expanded with the mandate at the end of Matthew's Gospel to evangelize all nations. In the traditional descending Christology it was not necessary to ask this question, because the fact that it happened later was assumed to mean that it was in the divine plan decreed from eternity. Moreover, in descending Christology the fact that Jesus was a Jew was not treated as being in itself significant; it was only mentioned with reference to the fulfillment of prophecies cited to substantiate the messianic claims made for him.

Perhaps the most important question that has arisen in a new way within Christology is the question of who Jesus is, and where he stands, in relation to the social, political, and economic issues of human history. Among the various "liberation theologies," the question of where Jesus stands in relation to the suffering and hopes of the vast masses of oppressed and destitute peoples is central to Christology. This approach to Christology goes to the roots of the term: It asks what is meant by calling Jesus the

anointed (messiah, christ) of God, noting that sin is not an abstraction but consists of violence, injustices, prejudices, greed, and so forth, from which real people suffer progressive hardship, degradation, and dehumanization.

A new interest in the meaning of the miracles of the gospel and of the resurrection has also unfolded. In current thought, these no longer appear simply as proofs of the claims made for Jesus, but as representative actions and events interpreting our world in the light of God's presence and power. Similarly, Jesus is seen not only as the presence and revelation of the divine, but also as the presence and revelation of the truly and fully human. The task of Christology is to ask not only what we learn about God from Jesus, but also what we learn about our own being and its possibilities and true destiny. Moreover, this is not merely a question about after-life, but centrally and extensively a question about the life we know in world, history, and society.

Finally, in today's world where many traditions and cultures mix in daily life, we cannot avoid the question about the uniqueness of Jesus as savior and divine incarnation. Some theologians resolve the issue by turning to traditional claims that Jesus is the one and only savior, but allowing the possibility of his saving grace reaching those who do not explicitly confess faith in him. How to preserve Christian faith but also remain open to the evidences of saving grace in non-Christian faith communities has become a central question in Christology. It goes back to the original issue: Who is Jesus, and what difference does he make in the destiny of the human community?

excerpts from

THEOLOGIAN, CATHOLIC ACTIVIST MONIKA HELLWIG DIES

By Patricia Sullivan Washington Post Staff Writer Thursday, October 6, 2005; B06

Monika Konrad Hildegard Hellwig, 74, an internationally known Georgetown University theologian who defended Catholic intellectualism against a Vatican crackdown, died Sept. 30 at Washington Hospital Center. She had a cerebral hemorrhage.

As president and executive director of the Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities from 1996 until two months ago, she was a leader in the U.S. discussion of Pope John Paul II's encyclical, *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, which required colleges to teach and follow church doctrine more closely.

"The question is whether the task of higher education in our pluralistic, changing society is to lock students into rules -- even rules I agree with -- or to teach them critical thinking," she said in 2003.

Dr. Hellwig, a former nun who attended the Second Vatican Council, was respected by laity, theologians and church leaders even when she publicly expressed differences of opinion with church hierarchy.

In 1986, while president of the Catholic Theological Society of America, she signed a letter on the group's behalf in support of the Rev. Charles E. Curran, a Catholic University professor. Curran had been stripped of his authority to teach in Catholic universities because of his dissent from the church's teachings on contraception, abortion and homosexuality. The statement, which caused a considerable stir, called Curran's punishment dangerous, professionally incomprehensible, unjust and indefensible. It "put [scholars] heads on the block" for possible retribution, Dr. Hellwig acknowledged at the time.

Chester Gillis, chairman of GU's Theology Department and author of "Roman Catholicism in America" (1999), called her a significant presence in the U.S. Catholic church whose written and spoken words were known by people in the pews and pulpits.

"She bridged the gap between the pastoral world and the theological world," he said. "She was a superb spokeswoman and defender of intellectual freedom in the academy, and the Vatican took her very seriously and respected her. Monika was not antithetical to their ambitions, and they knew that. They also knew she was not someone who was going to back down."

Dr. Hellwig, a Silver Spring resident, taught for more than three decades at GU, including six years as the Landegger Distinguished Professor of Theology. She left in 1996 to run the association of more than 200 Catholic colleges and universities. She was a senior research fellow at GU's Woodstock Theological Center at the time of her death.

Colleagues described her as a "pathfinder" in ecumenical and interreligious dialogues who worked on initiatives for women in higher education and theological scholarship and on efforts to foster peace and justice through education.

She worried about Catholic theologians losing touch with the history of the church's teaching. "The cumulative wisdom of the past is less known," she said in 1995 to the Catholic Theological Society. "More and more of us are doing instant theology."

But she also spoke forthrightly against efforts by lower-ranking Vatican officials in Rome to exercise control over U.S. Catholic education. Vatican officials "think they can shape the world over here, and they can't," she said in 1999, warning that forcing change would create problems with accrediting associations, contracts and academic reputations.

Efforts by the Vatican to discipline the U.S. church could backfire, she repeatedly warned. "The major problem the hierarchy faces may be that Catholics simply don't believe in Hell and eternal punishment the way they used to," she said in 1986. "The American laity, especially the college-educated, is well aware that the hierarchy doesn't have many sanctions against them. It's harder to frighten them."

She was born Dec. 10, 1929, in what was Brelau, Germany, to a German father and Dutch mother who was a noted sculptor. Her grandparents were Jewish, so as Hitler came into power in Germany, the family moved to Holland, where her father was later killed by Germans.

After Germany invaded Holland, Dr. Hellwig, then 8 years old, and her two sisters, Marianne and Angelika, were sent to safety in Scotland with the help of a Jewish-Catholic humanitarian organization. Her mother survived the war and reunited with her daughters in 1946, but died two days after their visit.

Dr. Hellwig entered University of Liverpool in 1946 at age 15 and received a law degree in 1949 and a social science degree in 1951. She moved to the United States in the early 1950s and became a member of the Medical Mission Sisters, a small community of nuns based in Washington, before receiving her master's degree in theology at Catholic University in 1956. She was a British citizen the rest of her life.

Dr. Hellwig worked in Washington and Philadelphia as a member of the order and then was sent to Rome in 1963 to observe and work as a correspondent at the Second Vatican Council, an ecumenical gathering that prompted huge changes in the Catholic Church.

She was a ghostwriter and research assistant to a Vatican official and was one of the few women allowed to observe the workings of the often-secret sessions of the Council. She returned to Washington in 1966 and completed a doctoral degree in theology at Catholic University.

Her order released her from her vows, after 14 years as a nun, so she could pursue her intellectual goals.

A prolific author, she wrote or co-wrote two dozen books, both scholarly and popular works, including "Understanding Catholicism" (1981), "Modern Catholic Encyclopedia" (1994), "Jesus, the Compassion of God" (1992) and "The Eucharist and the Hunger of the World" (1976).

She was a visiting lecturer at 11 universities, received 32 honorary degrees and 15 named awards, including the John Courtney Murray Award from the Catholic Theological Society of America in 1984. In 1994, she was awarded the Reverend Theodore M. Hesburgh, CSC Award for outstanding contribution to Catholic higher education by the Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities.

She adopted three children and raised them as a single mother while working as an assistant and associate professor at GU.

Her children, Erica Parker Hellwig of Silver Spring, Michael Quincy Hellwig of Manassas and Carlos Hellwig of Clinton, survive her, as do three grandchildren and two sisters in Europe.

Dr. Hellwig was a member and volunteer at St. Rose of Lima Catholic Church in Gaithersburg.

Gillis said "she understood the people in the pews are the people who maintain the faith. She wanted an intelligent Catholic faith and educated Catholic faith."