

Christology 'from below'

by [Leo D. Lefebure](#) in the [November 17, 1999](#) issue

Jesus: Symbol of God, by Roger Haight, S.J.

Roger Haight's rich, magisterial survey of Christology from biblical times to the present is filled with useful summaries of a wide array of complex and difficult issues. It is a helpful reference for students, preachers and professors—even for those who may disagree with Haight's conclusions. Haight's goal is an ecumenical inculturation of Christian faith in a postmodern world saturated with historical consciousness and aware of cultural and religious pluralism. Haight approaches Christology "from below," beginning with Jesus of Nazareth as a human figure and concluding with a "high" Christology which affirms his divinity. Though he acknowledges the legitimacy of both "Logos" and "Spirit" Christologies, Haight considers the latter more in harmony with contemporary sensibilities.

Though Haight's sifting of the biblical and historical evidence is judicious, and his constructive position is thoughtful and well considered, there are two puzzling oversights in his work. Despite his professed intention to explore Christology in dialogue with representatives of all Christian denominations, he completely ignores the contemporary representatives of the churches that did not accept the Councils of Ephesus or Chalcedon—the Assyrian Church of the East (traditionally but inaccurately called "Nestorian") and the Oriental Orthodox churches (traditionally but inaccurately called "Monophysite"). Haight reviews the contemporary relevance of the fifth-century christological controversies without ever mentioning the quiet revolution in official Catholic Christology that has taken place in recent years. In the 1980s and '90s, the Catholic Church has signed common statements on Christology with many of the Oriental Orthodox churches (the Coptic, Syrian, Armenian, Ethiopian and Malankara Syrian) and with the Assyrian Church of the East. These agreements acknowledge that the mutual condemnations which followed the Councils of Ephesus and Chalcedon were based largely on misunderstandings.

There is now an unprecedented openness among the churches to acknowledge various ways of expressing the identity of Jesus Christ. The agreement between the Roman Catholic Church and the Assyrian Church of the East would offer official

support for Haight's own sympathetic reading of the Antiochene approach to Christology. Awareness of the dialogue with the Oriental Orthodox churches would prod Haight not to use the term "monophysite" without qualification. Oriental Orthodox leaders view it as misleading, historically inaccurate and insulting. (They object that the term implies a singular nature ["monos physis"] in Jesus which would deny his humanity; following Cyril of Alexandria and Severus of Antioch, they profess one composite nature ["mia physis"] which includes Jesus' humanity. Thus they would prefer to be called "Miaphysites.")

Moreover, the official ecumenical discussions and agreements acknowledge the relativity of the meaning of the original terms of the debate to the various cultures of the time. This could provide a point of contact for Haight's own effort to reinterpret and reframe the central affirmations of the early church.

Haight's assertion of universal generalizations which exclude Buddhist perspectives and sensibilities is another surprising element in his Christology, which claims to be in dialogue with world religions. In considering the relation between Jesus and other religious traditions, Haight proposes a pluralistic theology which sees all religions as mediations of God's salvation. Though he asserts the universal normativity of the revelation of God in Jesus Christ, he also recognizes the validity and normativity of other major religious traditions. While much of Haight's analysis can be applied to the world's theistic traditions, the universal structure of religious experience he proposes does not fit Buddhism. Haight sees faith as "a universal form of human experience" that "entails an awareness of and loyalty to an ultimate or transcendent reality." Many Buddhists would have difficulty recognizing their own religious experience as a form of faith in a transcendent reality. Since Buddhism does not rely on a creating and redeeming God, to see it as a mediation of God's salvation would appear to be a step toward the inclusivism which Haight is seeking to move beyond.

Especially troubling from a Buddhist perspective is Haight's claim that "all authentic and lasting religious experiences display the character of having been given gratuitously by God." Buddhism does not rely on any divine revelation coming from a transcendent God. Early Buddhism remembered Shakyamuni Buddha not as a prophet from God but as a pathfinder who said, "I myself found the way. Whom shall I call Teacher? Whom shall I teach?" The difficulty of fitting Buddhism into broad generalizations about "authentic and lasting religious experiences" raises a broader question about the coherence of positing a mutual normativity of different religious traditions.