

CHAPTER 1

Historical Jesuses and Imaginary Christs

From the very beginning of the Christian movement, there have been many Christs. Biblical scholars comment endlessly, for example, on the different titles used by the authors of the New Testament in their attempt to identify who Jesus of Nazareth really is. In addition to “Christ,” which is itself a title, the New Testament applies to Jesus the titles “Son of Man,” “Son of God,” “Word,” “Lord,” “God,” and “Emmanuel,” among others.¹ Each of these can, in turn, be understood in various ways. Of course, these titles are not necessarily all at odds with one another. Especially since it is a transcendent reality that the New Testament authors claim to have in view, it should not be surprising that they find it necessary to employ numerous titles and descriptions; no one formulation can capture something that outstrips the finite reality in which all of our language is rooted. At the same time, the christological controversies of Christianity’s first five centuries show a church struggling with genuinely different interpretations of the person and nature of Jesus Christ. The pronouncements of the great ecumenical councils such as Nicea and Chalcedon attempted to bring order to the church’s faith about Christ, but as the eminent church father Athanasius recognized about Nicea, such pronouncements had the relatively modest goal of determining what could *not* be said about Jesus Christ. In other words, they merely set negative boundaries for the church’s faith and teaching. Plenty of room remained for different positive formulations about the Christ, and this christological elbowroom has been thoroughly exploited down through the ages of Christian history. Many versions of Christ have found their way into Christian life and practice.²

This christological pluralism has continued unabated in our own time. In fact, as we shall see in chapter 2, there are a number of factors affecting modern Western Christianity—from the loss of authority of classic dogmatic pronouncements to the general pluralism of contemporary Western culture—that virtually guarantee our era an unprecedented number of Christs. What is more, these different Christs are not simply a function of there being different churches or Christian denominations.

Rather, the many Christs now often exist side by side within single churches, indeed within single congregations. Even a brief survey of some of the Christs that can claim followers today provides a striking sense of the potentially overwhelming pluralism of the contemporary scene.

We can begin with Jesus Christ as ethical teacher. There are many Christians today who, if asked for a summary of the essence of Christian faith, would reply with "Love your neighbor as yourself." While concern about the moral teachings of Jesus has obviously been a constant in Christian history, the tendency to focus on them in relative isolation from the more doctrinal strands of Christian tradition is a contemporary legacy of various movements in modern Western Christianity. The Enlightenment and Deism, for example, left their mark on American thought via figures such as Thomas Jefferson. And what came to be known as Protestant liberalism, a nineteenth-century movement in Protestant theology that was generally suspicious of traditional metaphysical and doctrinal formulations, continues to exercise influence on the theological agenda of mainline Protestantism in America. Nor should we overlook the impact of what is often labeled the "civil religion."³ The civil religion is a set of public religious sensibilities and practices, usually purged of the specific tenets of individual religious traditions, that provides a background of piety for American society as a whole. It is displayed, for instance, in the obligatory references to God in presidential speeches, as well as in certain quasi-religious holidays such as Thanksgiving. Although the civil religion is ordinarily regarded as a watered-down version of the particular faiths that various Americans embrace, it also acts back upon those particular pieties. In its focus upon general ethical principles, backed up by only the vaguest of theological tenets, the civil religion reinforces a reading of Jesus Christ as first and foremost an ethical teacher.

Any survey of the ways in which contemporary Christians envision Christ must mention Christ as liberator. With intellectual support from Latin American liberation theology, as well as from feminist and African-American theologies, numerous Christians see Christ as the one who liberates the oppressed and leads the struggle against unjust practices and structures in society. Martin Luther King Jr. and Archbishop Romero of El Salvador provide dramatic models of devotion to Christ as liberator. Both men were martyred as a result of applying their vision of Christ as liberator to their respective societies. All versions of liberation christology attempt to persuade Christians that the Christ is directly relevant to the social and political orders of the world.

A seemingly very different version of Christ is offered by those who put him forth as a model of psychological well-being and a source of

personal success. This very American version of Christ has been championed by a host of twentieth-century religious salesman. He was presented in the first third of the century by Bruce Barton's *The Man Nobody Knows*, which saw Jesus as a model of the successful business executive. The book's epigraph uses italics to give an unusual meaning to a familiar biblical passage—"Wist ye not that I must be about my Father's *business*?"—and it has chapters on Christ as "The Executive," "His Advertisements," and as "The Founder of Modern Business."⁴ This sort of Christ received its most famous mid-century presentation in Norman Vincent Peale's *The Power of Positive Thinking*.⁵ That this Christ is still popular today should come as no surprise, given our current appetite for self-help programs. One thinks here of Robert Schuller's "Hour of Power" Sunday-morning television broadcasts, beamed to thousands of homes from his Crystal Cathedral in California. Schuller's "possibility thinking" echoes Peale's earlier prescription for well-being.

If the image of Christ as a model of personal success is a fairly recent arrival on the scene, so also is the melding of Christ with so-called New Age spirituality. This Christ too is focused much more on the individual psyche and its quest for personal fulfillment than on the larger structures of society. A salient feature of the New Age movement is its internal pluralism. That is, in addition to its being one tendency among others within a pluralistic milieu, the New Age is itself built on the premise that one can borrow different insights from many times and places and put them together in an idiosyncratic designer spirituality. Thus, if Jesus Christ is to be made sufficiently malleable to serve as a resource for the New Age project, he must somehow be set free from his original context, not only in first-century Palestine, but also and especially from the tradition of the church. It is not surprising, then, that one finds on New Age bookshelves works such as *The Lost Teachings of Jesus*, by Mark L. Prophet and Elizabeth Clare Prophet.⁶ The first part of that endeavor is titled "Missing Texts: Karma and Reincarnation," which suggests the way in which the authors want to associate Jesus with ideas different from those that hold sway in the Christian tradition. Similarly, the well-stocked New Age bookstore will have a copy of *Edgar Cayce's Story of Jesus*, which collects teachings about Jesus that Cayce derived from his clairvoyant readings.⁷ Alongside these twentieth-century works, one may well find texts on something like the ancient gnostics, since Christian gnosticism is one of the first examples of the attempt to set forth a Christ who is in many ways different from the Christ championed by what turned out to be orthodox Christianity.⁸

While New Age spirituality draws on various currents that are sometimes loosely called "mystical," classical mysticism, the attempt to attain an unmediated relation to God, is garnering new interest in Amer-

ican society as well. College courses that treat Christian mystics from John of the Cross to Julian of Norwich and that introduce students to the Muslim Sufis and the Jewish Kabbalah are fully subscribed. Whatever the reason for this current interest, whether it be a passing fancy or a heartfelt response to the perceived barrenness of the contemporary spiritual landscape, it is inevitable that such an interest will help fuel a Christ-mysticism. Christ as the object of mystical longing, as the “bridegroom of the soul,” an image drawn from the allegorical reading of the biblical “Song of Songs,” has a long and distinguished history within Christian piety.⁹ This Christ is reclaiming a place today, alongside the other versions of the Christ.

The cosmic Christ too seems to have renewed relevance. “Cosmic Christ” is the expression frequently used to designate the notion of Christ as the Logos through which the universe was created and which gives it its rational structure.¹⁰ While Christ as model of psychological wellbeing and the New Age Christ are both tightly focused on the individual, the cosmic Christ widens the believer’s horizons to the boundaries of the very universe itself. At the same time, in its philosophical abstraction from concrete human events, this model of Christ can be as apolitical as its self-help and New Age counterparts. But we may well find a new wrinkle in the idea of the cosmic Christ in our time, not only insofar as it can be brought into discussion with the contemporary scientific conceptions of the universe—one thinks of Teilhard de Chardin’s finally unsuccessful attempts in this regard—but also thanks to present-day ecological sensibilities. Christians seeking to find resources in their faith for caring for the earth, and even for imbuing it with the character of the sacred, have an ally in the cosmic Christ.¹¹

Of current interest too is what, for want of a better term, I shall call the Buddhist Christ. Given the genuine fascination on the part of many Westerners, including Western Christians, with the religious traditions of Asia, it is unsurprising that there are persons who approach the Christ with spiritual sensibilities imbibed from the reading of Hindu, Buddhist, and Taoist religious writings. A particularly striking example is Stephen Mitchell’s *The Gospel According to Jesus*, which brings to its interpretation of Christ a wealth of knowledge on the great Asian traditions, and which tends to see Christ as a Zen master.¹²

Lest all of the Christs we have listed thus far seem somehow lacking in severity, it should be noted that the apocalyptic Christ has by no means faded from the scene. Indeed, the Christian fundamentalism invented in the modern West put new emphasis on this Christ and on the murky passages in the book of Revelation that prophesy his advent. In the latter half of the twentieth century, for example, the Cold War between the Soviet Union and the United States provided ample fuel for

the apocalyptic fire: fundamentalist authors filled bookshelves and crowded lecture circuits with detailed explanations of how the prophecies of Revelation applied to Communist Russia, which these commentators identified with the Beast mentioned in Revelation, and how Armageddon would soon explode in the Middle East. The end of the Cold War did not, of course, spell the end of Christian apocalyptic expectations, anymore than did the passing of the many conditions in earlier Christian history that had been read through the lens of the book of Revelation. Furthermore, the change of the millennium has provided more than enough impetus for continued apocalyptic fervor among some Christians.

Finally, that Christ is present also who saves us from sin through the shedding of his blood on the cross. One might be tempted to call this the most traditional of the models of Christ that have contemporary appeal—has he not always been at the center of the Roman Catholic Mass, for instance?—were it not for the way in which this Christ too has been modified by modern American culture, especially by the individualism and the experiential emphasis of American piety. That this Christ has an important place among the many Christs that occupy our pluralistic scene is evidenced, first of all, by the powerful presence of evangelical Christianity in American society. The Christ who died to save the individual from his or her sins is still the preeminent version of Christ in evangelicalism. Billy Graham, despite his failing health, managed to continue preaching this Christ to millions of listeners right up to the end of the century. We can even add to the evidence for this Christ's popularity the incongruous but now familiar sight of fans at professional football games unfurling large, hand-printed banners marked "John 3:16."¹³

In the chapters that follow we shall have the opportunity to consider several approaches to Christ in more detail. But suffice it to say now, by way of introduction, that a worship service in the contemporary parish may find persons kneeling next to one another who are devoted to significantly different Christs. A number of caveats are in order, however, here at the outset.

First, the nine Christs we have briefly surveyed by no means exhaust the possible versions of Christ that are effective in contemporary Christianity. They simply represent some of the most familiar christological options of the day.

Second, the Christs of interest in our exploration of christological pluralism are those that are genuine options for ordinary Christians. While we shall touch on the ruminations of various theologians in order to plumb the implications of this pluralism, we shall not focus on the particular christologies of individual theologians for their own sake. In other words, the pluralism at issue here is not the many different Christs

set forth in the contemporary christologies of professional theologians, but the diverse Christs operative in everyday Christian piety.

Third, the way in which the nine contemporary Christs have been described above, the manner in which they have been picked out and distinguished from one another, is inevitably artificial. In reality, the different approaches to Christ often overlap; their boundaries are not always as sharply drawn as our survey might suggest.

Fourth, and most important, is the fact that these Christs may well be *different* from one another without necessarily being *contradictory*. While there is little doubt that it is impossible to harmonize all of them, might it not be possible to find ways to fit some of them together, or at least to have them work peaceably side by side? This brings us to the central issues of the chapters that follow: How can we find our way among this confusing display of so many Christs? Is it possible, and is it legitimate, to look for the “genuine” Christ among this host of contenders? Should we look, instead, for genuine Christs? Or, in the end, must we be content with a veritable chaos of Christs, with no ordering principles available to us? Before we can begin our attempt to answer these questions in earnest, we must explore some crucial background categories and issues, culminating with the notion of “imaginary Christs.”

We can begin our background work with a brief consideration of the modern distinction between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith. By the phrase “the historical Jesus,” or “the Jesus of history,” scholars have usually intended that which can be known about the man Jesus of Nazareth simply via modern principles of historical research. The “Christ of faith,” by contrast, is Jesus Christ as he is received and proclaimed in the church’s attitude of faith and commitment. In theory, historical research should be able to provide us with an account of the actions and statements of Jesus. The transcendent dimension of reality, on the other hand, is beyond the purview of any empirical historical method. Christ in his divinity and as the risen Lord can only be grasped by faith. With the advent of modern historical methods of investigation in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the question inevitably arose whether it is possible to escape christological pluralism by determining which version of the Christ of faith best complements the historical Jesus. This search for the historical Jesus undoubtedly owes much of its original impetus to modernity’s disdain for what it regarded as the unsavory, because irrational, elements of Christian supernaturalism. But a related issue is surely the desire to avoid the destructive side of christological pluralism: European history with its wars of religion had shown Christians to be all-too-willing to do battle over their competing versions of Christ.

The beginnings of the quest for the historical Jesus can be dated with the posthumous publication of a manuscript fragment by the German scholar Hermann Samuel Reimarus in 1778.¹⁴ Reimarus argued provocatively that the actual Jesus of history bore little resemblance to any version of Christ that could be preached by the church. Rather than being the same person approached from two different perspectives, the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith are, for Reimarus, wholly different figures. Reimarus' historical Jesus had expected to become a this-worldly, political messiah, but had died in despair. Belief in his resurrection was made possible by his disciples stealing his body from the tomb. But many writers who came after Reimarus, particularly in the nineteenth century, were convinced that research on the historical Jesus need not be used to undermine Christian commitment but could support it instead, even if the commitment that resulted involved a significant reworking of the church's traditional approach to Christ. As W. Barnes Tatum explains:

The nineteenth century saw the rise of that theological movement known as Protestant "liberalism." . . . Liberal theologians desired a firm foundation for Christian belief and practice. They sought that foundation neither in the traditional creeds nor in the New Testament generally nor in the Gospels. Rather, they sought that foundation in the personality and religion of Jesus himself. Liberal theology emphasized Jesus not so much as savior but as teacher and example. It stressed not so much faith *in* but the faith *of* Jesus as he taught the Fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of humanity.¹⁵

In the case of Protestant liberalism, then, the discovery of the Jesus of history may not show us which Christ of faith is the correct one, since it prefers the faith of Jesus to faith in him, but it promises to perform a related task: it purports to show us how the very notion of Christian faith should be focused on the teaching of the man Jesus in a way that can eliminate the specter of warfare among competing dogmatic Christs. Partly as a result of this optimistic attitude about what historical research could do for Christian commitment, the "life of Christ" became a familiar genre in the nineteenth century.

The confidence displayed by the nineteenth-century biographers of Jesus suffered a serious blow at the beginning of the next century, a blow delivered by Albert Schweitzer's famous book *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, which was published in Germany in 1906.¹⁶ Schweitzer made it clear that most of the nineteenth-century attempts to write a historically accurate biography of Jesus were anything but objective historical efforts. Instead, the authors usually projected their own contemporary cultural sensibilities upon the figure of Jesus and recreated him in their

own image. The real Jesus, argued Schweitzer, was not Protestant liberalism's gentle ethical sage, but an apocalyptic prophet who mistakenly expected that he would bring in the Kingdom of God. Schweitzer's version of the historical Jesus bore little resemblance, then, to either the Jesus of the Protestant liberal biographers or the Christs preached by the churches.

In the wake of Schweitzer's book, and with a mounting skepticism about the Gospels' usefulness as historical records, the majority of Christian scholars in the first half of the twentieth century regarded the quest for the historical Jesus as pointless. The Gospels, they concluded, are not historical accounts from which it is possible to reconstruct a biography of Jesus. Rather, they are already testimonies of faith. Furthermore, anything that might be learned about the Jesus of history would be irrelevant to the Christ of faith. While the two need not be understood as antithetical in the way that critics such as Reimarus, and to a lesser extent Schweitzer, had suggested, the Christ of faith can exist very well on his own, independently of whatever paltry details about the historical Jesus might be available.

In recent years, however, there has been a resurgence of interest in the Jesus of history. Numerous books have appeared on the subject, and scholarly conferences on the historical Jesus have attracted wide attention.¹⁷ But the latest questers for the historical Jesus do not intend to embrace the naive assumptions of their forebears of the eighteenth, and especially the nineteenth, century. They continue to maintain, for example, that the Gospels do not provide the basis for a biography of Jesus. But they hold that the development of tools not utilized by biblical scholars in the past, tools provided by disciplines such as sociology and the history of religions, may be able to give us new insights into the social, cultural, and religious context in which Jesus of Nazareth lived and in terms of which he set forth his message. In addition, many of them are willing to countenance some relevance of the Jesus of history for the Christ of faith.¹⁸ The depth of this recent Jesus research is often impressive, and the results deserve serious consideration by everyone from biblical scholars and theologians to laypersons. But on one particular issue the latest version of the quest for the historical Jesus does not provide much help: anyone who looks to the results of this new quest for a quick escape from the dilemma of christological pluralism, if dilemma it be, will end up being sorely disappointed. For, as it turns out, there is pluralism here too. When we examine the work of some of the best-known participants in the new quest, we discover that the historical Jesus set forth by Marcus Borg, for example, does not seem to be the same person as the one described by John Dominic Crossan, and Crossan's Jesus, in turn, seems a stranger to the man described by Ray-

mond Brown.¹⁹ Crossan himself remarks on “the number of competent and even eminent scholars producing pictures of Jesus at wide variance with one another.”²⁰ Furthermore, he suggests that this diversity is not simply a contingent fact about the current crop of studies of the historical Jesus, but that it is inevitable. Because we have no direct access to the Jesus of history, every so-called “historical Jesus” is in fact one possible reconstruction, one *reading of* the Jesus of history.²¹ Each such reading will be done from its author’s particular vantage point. On the surface, this observation is merely a hermeneutical truism: our age takes it for granted that every historical reconstruction is perspectival. But the observation takes on greater significance if we recall how few details we have about the life of Jesus and how far removed we are from him in time. While a reconstruction of the life of Frederick Douglass, for example, would necessarily be only one possible reading of him, it is highly unlikely that it could support the degree of authorial creativity that any historical reconstruction of the life of Jesus must bear. In any case, if the quest for the historical Jesus was originally motivated, in part, by the desire to escape from a potentially destructive christological pluralism, it has not in fact provided any such escape. On the contrary, it simply provides a new pluralism of its own; it offers us a host of historical Jesuses.

While historians and others may have entertained the notion of fleeing from the many Christs of faith to the Jesus of history, numerous twentieth-century Christian theologians have counseled Christians to move in exactly the opposite direction. The issue for these theologians is the potential danger of making faith beholden to historical research. Must one wait to make a decision about Christian faith until the historians clear up certain ambiguities in the life story of Jesus, for example? Should the believer alter his or her faith from day to day as the historians hem and haw, putting forth one conclusion and then quickly replacing it with another? Could historical Jesus research ever come up with evidence that would devastate the very foundations of Christian faith? Many modern and contemporary theologians have understandably concluded that it is best to avoid these difficulties by seeing the Christ of faith as largely independent of the results of historical research about Jesus. They have sought, as Paul Tillich puts it in his comments on Martin Kähler’s classic theological manifesto of 1896, to “make the certainty of faith independent of the unavoidable incertitudes of historical research.”²² Kähler himself speaks of finding an “invulnerable area” (*sturmfreies Gebiet*) for faith, safely removed from the uncertainties of the historian’s trade.²³ Kähler has no doubt that the Christ of faith is a response to the real historical individual, Jesus of Nazareth. But he holds that we will never get to that individual, not to mention his larger sig-

nificance for our lives, by means of historical research.

For such influential followers of Kähler's position as Paul Tillich and Rudolf Bultmann, it makes little difference what one can or cannot know about the Jesus of history. All that is required for Christian faith is what Tillich, echoing Kahler, calls the "biblical picture" of Jesus as the Christ.²⁴ Nor are things entirely different for a more decidedly "neo-orthodox" theologian such as Karl Barth. This is not to say that Barth's Jesus is ahistorical. Barth would be loath to present Jesus Christ as merely an illustration of universal moral principles, for example, in the way that philosophers such as Immanuel Kant have done. The point, rather, is that the concrete figure of Jesus the Christ is encountered, for Barth, not via historical research but in the faithful witness of the Scriptures and the church.

While the work of Edward Schillebeeckx might be cited as an exception, most contemporary Roman Catholic theology also seems to relegate the quest for the historical Jesus to the background.²⁵ Karl Rahner's approach to christology via a transcendental and transcendent anthropology, for example, presents us with something much more akin to the Christ of faith than to the Jesus of history.²⁶ For Catholic thinkers, of course, Christ has always been encountered primarily through the Scriptures and the tradition of the church, not through historical research. Indeed, the contemporary catechism holds that the resurrected Lord is present to the faithful in the church in a more direct and powerful fashion than the man Jesus was to persons who encountered him as a historical individual in the first century:

When his visible presence was taken from them, Jesus did not leave his disciples orphans. He promised to remain with them until the end of time; he sent them his Spirit. As a result communion with Jesus has become, in a way, more intense: "By communicating his Spirit, Christ mystically constitutes as his body those brothers of his who are called together from every nation."²⁷

Of course the Christ of faith, the Christ experienced as present in the church in every age, should not be understood as somehow antithetical to the Jesus of history. While the Christ of faith is grasped through existential commitment rather than discerned via application of the modern historical method, the Christ of faith points to the same Jesus that historians attempt to describe. That is, while believers approach Jesus of Nazareth through the interpretive categories of faith, those categories are meant to be applied to the actual man Jesus, however difficult it may be to accumulate mundane, historical details about him. The Christ of faith, then, always makes reference to the historical individual, Jesus of Nazareth.

To summarize our explorations up to this point: christological pluralism is in full flower within contemporary Christianity. One might suppose that some order could be brought to potential christological chaos by going back to the historical Jesus and determining which ones of the many Christs of faith are closest to the Jesus of history. But, whatever its other benefits, the quest for the historical Jesus proves to be of little help in this regard. First, there is reason for skepticism about our ability ever to recover significant information about the historical Jesus. Second, the present state of the quest presents us with innumerable Jesuses; pluralism simply reappears in another form. One cannot flee the intimidating conflict and manyness of Christs of faith for the security of an empirically certain Jesus of history. But numerous twentieth-century Christian theologians have suggested proceeding the other way around: we ought to flee the uncertainties of historical Jesus research for the existential and religious security of the Christ of faith. And thus we return to the issue of christological pluralism. For now we must say to a Kähler or a Tillich, "Which Christ of faith ought I to embrace?" Perhaps it is true that the most legitimate Christ of faith will be the one rooted in the biblical picture of Jesus as the Christ. But is there only one such picture? It seems clear that the New Testament, which is the product of the church's living and pluralistic tradition, contains many pictures of Christ. And even if we were to agree to focus on just one of those pictures, would our interpretations of it coincide? That the New Testament lends itself to a variety of interpretations is abundantly, and perhaps frustratingly, clear to anyone having even the most cursory knowledge of the Christian tradition.

All of this puts us in a position to consider the notion of imaginary Christs. However much a particular version of the Christ of faith may be a response to the actual historical individual, Jesus of Nazareth, and however genuinely it refers to an eternal, transcendent Christ, human imagination will forever play a crucial part in the generation of Christs of faith. I use the word "imagination" here to refer to the creative, constructive element in human thought. All experience and knowledge involve some degree of imagination. Even the most empirically derived piece of scientific data entails a modicum of interpretation. Knowledge, in other words, is never a merely passive affair. As philosophers from Kant up to the present day have shown us, the mind cannot simply mirror the reality round about it, but must to some degree construct that reality. It is certainly true, however, that different kinds of experience and understanding require different degrees of imaginative construction on the part of the knower.²⁸ We can envision a continuum along which it is possible to plot, from left to right, approaches to the world which require an ever-higher proportion of imagination. Scientific data collec-

tion will be plotted toward the left, low end of the continuum, while Christs of faith must be placed toward the high end.²⁹

The contemporary pluralism of Christs, the fact that many Christs coexist within single churches, is a powerful indicator of the role of imagination in the formation of Christs of faith. There is no one Christ of faith that all Christians embrace, but rather many Christs, each the result of a different imaginative or constructive vantage point. But this christological pluralism only adds further evidence to other, more basic reasons for acknowledging imagination's especially potent role in the formation of Christs of faith. These other considerations can be tied to three paradoxes that will surface at various points in the chapters that follow. We begin, logically enough, with the *christological paradox*. From Tertullian, the second-century church father, to Soren Kierkegaard and his heirs in contemporary Christian thought, Christian theologians have wondered at the paradox of the infinite God taking on flesh and living and dying among us as a finite human being. Thus Tertullian wrote,

You will not be "wise" unless you become a "fool" to the world, by believing "the foolish things of God." . . . The Son of God was crucified; I am not ashamed because men must needs be ashamed of it. The Son of God died; it is by all means to be believed, because it is absurd. And He was buried and rose again; the fact is certain, because it is impossible.³⁰

Kierkegaard calls the idea of the God-man the "absolute paradox."³¹ The notion of the infinite God becoming a human being appears to be a category mistake, the mixing of two disparate categories of reality. Thus, it is akin to asking, "What color is Monday?" As a category mistake, which is one particular kind of paradox, the concept of the God-man cannot be grasped via any of our ordinary conceptual machinery. It requires a creative leap of imagination, the kind of distortion of our ordinary conceptuality represented, for example, by nonliteral modes of thought and communication. Hence we find Kierkegaard resorting to parables in his treatment of the Christ-event.³²

Closely related to the christological paradox is what we shall call the *revelation paradox*. Theologians of a certain stripe might be tempted to use the concept of divine revelation to avoid the need to credit human imagination in the construction of Christs of faith. But the revelation paradox consists in the fact that no appeal to divine revelation can ever avoid a firm reliance upon purely human faculties. First of all, how are we to decide which of many alleged instances of revelation are genuine? The point is precisely that *we* must decide that instance "a" is divine revelation, while instance "b" is not. John Locke, good Enlightenment

philosopher that he was, clearly understood how human reason must come into play in any reception of revelation. The immediate revelation of God would seem to provide the most secure kind of knowledge, said Locke, but “our assurance can be no greater than our knowledge is, that it *is* a revelation from God.”³³ Revelation can never outrun the role of human reason. Applied to Christian faith in the God-man, this means that the christological paradox is not simply a given to which one must subsequently respond. Rather, Christians must decide that Jesus is God, and hence that he represents the paradox of the God-man.

But, secondly, even when we have decided that a particular event or message is a divine revelation, we are not yet done with our constructive work. We must still grasp the content of that revelation. Imagination is required just in order to lay the groundwork for this task. Before we can grasp the life and action of Jesus as revelatory of God, for instance, we must employ imagination to discern a meaningful pattern in the events of Jesus’ life and action. This point can helpfully be underscored by making use of Hans Georg Gadamer’s treatment of art. In his attempt to free Western thought from the constricted notion of knowledge that limits it to what can be obtained by the objectifying methods of the natural sciences, Gadamer turns to art. For Gadamer, the work of art is not merely a matter of subjective experience, but a source of truth about the world. If reality is defined as what is untransformed, then art is “the raising up of this reality into its truth.”³⁴ The work of art configures a confusing and disparate reality in such a way that we can grasp its true significance or essence. There is a sense, then, in which the artwork is truer than the original that it represents.

John Macquarrie applies Gadamer’s insight to the writing of a gospel, so that we can see the element of imagination required to uncover the significance of the Christ story:

A gospel does resemble a work of art in the sense that it does not merely copy the original or offer a second version of it, but, dare we venture to say, exposes the essence of the original, so that there takes place the event of the recognition of truth, the setting forth in unconcealedness (*aletheia*) of the fundamental meaning and reality of the original? . . . a gospel is concerned (to use Gadamer’s phrase) with the recognition of the essence. It achieves its aim by weaving together historical incidents, teachings and sayings, mythological ideas, legendary accretions, theological reflections into a unique kind of discourse.³⁵

Macquarrie uses as a concrete example the account of the trial of Jesus found in the Gospel of John:

If there had been a clerk of court and he had left us a transcript of the trial, it might have made us see it very differently from the account in

the Fourth Gospel. But the evangelist whom we call John, by what Bultmann calls “a remarkable interweaving of tradition and specifically Johannine narration,” has dramatically presented the essential meaning as he perceived it and as we are enabled to perceive it—a reversal of the roles of Jesus and his judges, so that Jesus emerges as the judge while the ecclesiastical and political establishments are put on trial and found wanting. It is a remarkable transfiguration of the facts, not a distortion but rather an exposure of the reality. This is not just analogous to a work of art—it is itself an art-work of genius.³⁶

Imagination is employed here, indeed an artistic imagination, in order to discern a meaning in the events and is required even just to uncover what we might term the mundane significance of these events.

To subsequently grasp such events as a revelation of God requires yet another use of imagination and takes us back into the territory of the christological paradox. The manifestation of an infinite God must be grasped and expressed in the only categories available to us, namely, those provided by our own finite languages and concepts.³⁷ The absolute paradox of the infinite God taking on finite human flesh, the christological paradox, requires a creative leap of imagination on the part of human beings precisely because it is a paradox. But *any* revelation of a genuinely infinite reality, whether or not it involves the infinite actually becoming identified with something finite, would find our ordinary conceptual inventory wanting, formed as that inventory is by the encounter of our finite cognitive resources with the finite world of which we are a part.³⁸ Thus, we are forced to choose between a rigorous *via negativa*, content to say only what the divine is not, or an imaginative use of language that creatively stretches it beyond its usual capabilities. The Thomistic doctrine of the analogical use of language, which pushes language beyond its everyday, univocal function, provides a classical example of the attempt to pursue the latter, creative option. There are really two levels of imaginative construction involved here. First, our everyday language is the result of a language tradition’s imaginative creation of categories for understanding reality. Second, we must now imaginatively stretch those everyday categories. This second step takes the construction of God-concepts and Christs of faith well beyond the level of imaginative construction required for most other concepts.

If human initiative is required to recognize something as a revelation, and if imaginative construction is tied up with grasping and communicating it in even the most general sense, imagination is certainly evident in the attempt to communicate the revelation of Christ *to a particular time and place*. Josef Geiselmann has pointed out, for example, that if the words of Christ are intended to be living revelation, then the tradition of the church “cannot really reproduce what Jesus once said

'literally,' because it is intended to be Jesus' word now, in the Church's situation as God has brought it about."³⁹ Revelation, in order to continue to function as revelation, must be applied to ever-new situations. The imaginative task here is to discern and articulate identity in difference: if the being and words of Christ are to retain their identity in a new context, they must be creatively reinterpreted. The identity must be preserved through the use of formulations different from those employed in the past.

The third paradox that we shall encounter in our exploration of imaginary Christs can be designated the *transcendence paradox*. This third paradox has to do not so much with why imagination is necessary where Christs are concerned, but, having granted that necessity, with the importance of being self-conscious about the imaginative character of our christological constructs. Christs of faith are about transcendence: they are meant to be apprehensions of Christ as the presence of God. Our preliminary investigation of the christological and revelation paradoxes has reinforced the familiar fact that the phenomenon of transcendence strains our finite faculties. The infinite, almost by definition, leaves those faculties behind, so that we are forced to fall back upon imagination in order to fill in the blanks in our knowledge of the divine, to respond to the "blank wonder" occasioned by the presence of the infinite.⁴⁰ The paradox presently at issue is that the most adequate response to such transcendence will be the one that most fully understands the *inadequacy* of its finite categories. Nothing more often serves as a screen upon which to project our all-too-human prejudices, desires, and ambitions than our notions of divinity, as Feuerbach and Freud would be happy to remind us. A theology can confidently describe God's transcendence in the most exalted terms but still end up advancing a view of the divine that is almost wholly self-serving. Indeed, this very confidence in one's abilities to describe the divine transcendence is what most effectively blinds one to the phenomenon of projection. By contrast, then, a formulation that is self-conscious about its humanness may, paradoxically, be better able to communicate genuine transcendence. Modern theological programs that appear to keep the transcendence paradox in view include the dialectical theology paradigmatically expressed in Karl Barth's *Romans*, which attempts to maintain the dialectic of "yes" and "no" in all of our talk about God, and Paul Tillich's discussion of the self-negating religious symbol, where the symbol undoes its own finite content in its effort to point to the divine.⁴¹

Yet another factor to be considered in understanding the role of imagination in the construction of Christs of faith, and perhaps the factor that brings us into greatest proximity to our ordinary use of the word "imaginary," is the need for devotees of the Christ to imaginatively con-

cretize and round out their pictures of him. Jesus as the Christ is understood not as an abstract version of God, but as the incarnation of God, that is, God in the concrete form of a particular human being. Christ provides access to God, so Christian faith claims, precisely insofar as Christ possesses this human concreteness. But the New Testament does not round out the person of the Christ for us. It is notoriously silent about matters such as the childhood of Jesus or his physical appearance, matters that would help us to grasp the concrete, personal reality of Jesus as the Christ. The pluralism of New Testament Christs is a factor here too, inasmuch as it means that the New Testament presents us with rough versions of many Christs, rather than with a fully realized version of one Christ of faith.

It is up to the individual believer, then, to imaginatively round out the personhood of Jesus as the Christ so as to be able to approach him as a concrete individual. The devotee of the cosmic Christ may picture a magisterial figure, for example, while the follower of Christ as liberator may imagine a volatile spokesman for and companion of the poor. It is unsurprising that artists carry out this imaginative task with particular effectiveness. A noteworthy contemporary example is provided by Pier Paolo Pasolini's 1964 film, *The Gospel According to St. Matthew*. While not a believer in any ordinary sense, Pasolini succeeds in bringing to life Jesus the Christ as a passionately committed, almost angry, religious seer who identifies with the poor. Pasolini follows the text of Matthew's gospel closely. He accomplishes his imaginative rounding out of Jesus as the Christ not by adding new events and new dialogue, but through the concrete presentation of what is already contained in the gospel: Pasolini has a particular actor, in a particular setting, give a particular interpretation of the words and deeds of Jesus.⁴²

The average follower of Jesus as the Christ will probably not accomplish the kind of full-blown imaginative rounding out found in Pasolini's film. But some effort in that direction is required if the Christ is to be encountered as a concrete figure, the one intended in the Christian doctrine of the incarnation. This imaginative realization of the figure of the Christ does not entail any kind of psychobiography. It is not necessary to reconstruct the psychological development of Jesus of Nazareth, but only to imbue him with the concrete personhood required for one to encounter him as a specific individual.

It is worth noting how this imaginative rounding out of the figure of Jesus as the Christ, by its very act of individualizing the Christ, tends to differentiate Christs of faith from one another all the more powerfully. The genuine pluralism of Christs of faith becomes especially apparent, in other words, when the different pictures of the Christ are each imaginatively filled out so as to become concrete individuals.

Lest we lose sight of our central topic, it is necessary to recall at this point that the existence of a plethora of different Christs side-by-side in contemporary Christian piety powerfully reinforces the sense that Christs of faith are imaginative human responses to Jesus of Nazareth and the chain of events that he set in motion. My Christ is different from the Christ of the person worshipping next to me, in large part because of the imaginative, constructive component in the being of all Christs. After all, imagination, by its very nature, differs from one time and place to another, from one group to another, and even from one individual to another.

We have considered a number of reasons why this imaginative component is essential to Christs of faith. First, our language, which already bears an imaginative interpretation of everyday reality, must be imaginatively stretched in order to approach the paradox or category mistake of Christ being both God and man. Second, constructive work is required in order to judge that something qualifies as a revelation of God. Third, if we are to grasp the content of any such revelation, the ground must be prepared by finding meaningful order in a particular constellation of events. Gadamer's account of how the work of art raises reality up into its truth provides a model for this third instance of imaginative construction. Imagination comes into play, fourthly, in the actual event of grasping the content of the revelation, or of anything that transcends the finite. This again requires an imaginative stretching of our finite categories of thought and communication. Imagination is required, fifthly, in order to discern identity in difference, which in this case is a matter of deciding what the venerable figure of Jesus as the Christ has to say in each new time and place. Sixth, imagination is apparent in the act of rounding out the figure of the Christ so that one can approach him as the presence of God in a concrete individual, rather than as an abstract manifestation of God.⁴³

Thus, while even our most mundane dealings with reality require some degree of imaginative interpretation, the creation of Christs of faith draws upon imagination to an unusually high degree. It is this fact that warrants the expression "imaginary Christs." At the same time, it should already be evident from what has been said above that the expression "imaginary Christs," as it is being used here, is in no way intended as synonymous with "unreal Christs." On the contrary, if there are any genuine Christs to be found, they will be functions of human imaginative construction in the ways that we have just indicated. Thus, Christian orthodoxy may judge a particular imaginary Christ, or several such Christs, an entirely proper response to the historical man, Jesus of Nazareth and to his transcendent reality as the risen Lord. Or, in terms of a less thoroughly orthodox perspective, the kind of perspective

opened up by the nonmetaphysical interpretations of God that we shall touch on in chapter 3, an imaginary Christ or Christs may be deemed a genuine response to Jesus and to a real element of transcendence that Jesus uncovered in the relationship of human beings with their universe.

Of course, we ordinarily use the word “imaginary” to refer to a construction that does not correspond to anything in reality. Hence, we say that a unicorn is an “imaginary beast,” for example. But note that we would find it odd to use the phrase “imaginary unicorns.” This phrase strikes us as misguided not in that it is simply redundant, but inasmuch as it suggests that there must exist at least one real unicorn, if we are to pick out others as imaginary. The expression “imaginary Christs” implies, then, that there does exist a real Christ. But it also suggests that our approaches to the real Christ involve an unusually large amount of imaginative work. That is, while we do usually reserve the word “imaginary” for constructions that do not correspond to reality at all, that word is useful here as a self-conscious device to help us keep in view the role of imagination in our Christ-making. It is important to keep the imaginative component in Christ-making ever in sight, given the truth of the transcendence paradox: those approaches to the transcendent are most adequate that recognize the limitations, the humanness, of their own conceptual and linguistic tools.

Thus, Christs of faith are imaginary, in our use of the term, but not unreal. Far from equating imaginary Christs with unreal Christs, we need to ask questions such as the following: “Which of the many imaginary Christs of faith confronting contemporary Christians are genuine Christs?” “What does it mean to talk about a ‘genuine’ Christ or Christs in the first place?” “Is there any way to settle on criteria of ‘reality’ or ‘genuineness’ without falling into dogmatic presumptuousness?” “Should we expect to find as many criteria for genuineness as there are Christs?”

Perhaps these questions will make some persons uneasy. Surely christological pluralism is to be celebrated rather than avoided. After all, no single imaginative construction can adequately grasp the reality of Jesus as the Christ. Thus, we get ever closer to that reality by putting together more and more perspectives on the Christ. The more vantage points upon which we are able to draw, the more profound will be our grasp of the reality of the Christ. Christological pluralism is advantageous too on a more mundane level: by allowing pluralism to flourish, we make it less likely that one particular version of the Christ will be invested with special authority and used as an instrument of power and coercion.

If christological pluralism is in fact to be prized rather than decried, why ask questions intended to sort out the various imaginary Christs of

faith? Why not just revel in the plethora of Christs that the human imagination is able to concoct? Consider three answers to this understandable query. First, however much champions of a particular sort of post-modernist sensibility may attempt to dissuade us from pursuing questions of truth, those questions inevitably intrude in any serious and practical confrontation with the world. In the context of Christs of faith, truth itself may be construed pluralistically, of course. Your criteria for determining which Christ or Christs truly reflect Jesus of Nazareth as the Christ may legitimately be different from my criteria. But we can nonetheless both make sense out of the idea that some imaginary Christs may truly reflect the figure of Jesus and his role as manifestation of the divine, while other Christs may distort those things. For instance, feminist theologians will probably not have the same standards of truth in view in their evaluation of Christs as did Thomas Aquinas or Friedrich Schleiermacher or Karl Barth. Yet they will still have standards of truth, and they will most likely utilize them to reject as perversions of the real Jesus Christ any Christs of faith that support the oppression of women. Feminist theologians, in other words, have tended not to champion a normless pluralism, but to work toward a pluralism that avoids unjust and oppressive Christs.

Second, far from our proposed christological sorting process being a tyrannical undertaking intended to quash difference, some such process is required as part of our responsibility to other human beings. Religious commitment is a dangerous phenomenon. Human history is an all-too-shocking record of the sufferings human beings are prepared to impose upon one another in the name of religion, from crusades to inquisitions to campaigns of ethnic cleansing. Thus, it is imperative that we test the spirits before we endorse any religious perspective. One who wishes to embrace a Christ of faith is responsible for picking out of the vast number proposed for devotion a Christ or Christs who will engender, in however modest a fashion, a more humane world rather than a more ghastly one.

Third, the attempt to sort through the many Christs of faith that inhabit the contemporary scene and determine which ones of them are in some sense genuine is not tantamount to a rejection of christological pluralism. On the contrary, the assumption here is that many imaginary Christs will be deemed genuine. It should be possible, however, to reject *some* Christs. We ought not to be reduced to a mindless christological relativism. In order to avoid that fate and to understand how it might be possible meaningfully to sort through the many Christs of faith, we must begin with a consideration of the relation of christological pluralism to the Christian tradition. This we shall attempt to do in the next chapter.