New Title from Knut Alfsvåg

*Christology as Critique: On the Relation between Christ, Creation, and Epistemology*

If the origin of the world is not a part of the world, what are the implications for our understanding of ourselves, the world, and its origin? In antiquity, both gentile and Christian authors agreed that the significance of this question could only be maintained by accepting the unbridgeable difference between the world and God. Not even Christology as the most ambitious attempt at developing a model for divine–human communication was allowed to undermine the principle of absolute divine difference. This changed with the modern emphasis on univocity and measurability as the defining aspects of knowledge. From the point of view of a philosophy of absolute difference, this appears as an arbitrary loss of perspective. By focusing on four authors—Cusanus, Luther, Hamann, and Kierkegaard—who have explored how the Christian and paradoxical understanding of Christ as eternal God and true human subverts the modern emphasis on unambiguity and definability, the present investigation makes an attempt to retrieve what has been lost. Classical Christology as interpreted by these authors thus appears as an indispensable tool for receiving and appreciating the gift of the world in a way that is not unduly limited by anthropocentric prejudice.

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1) The title of this book is *Christology as Critique*. What is the object of the critique, and why is the doctrine of Christ chosen as the foundation of the critique?

The object of the critique is the worldview of modernity as oriented from the idea of human reason as the obvious and sufficient starting point. This book argues that this starting point is neither obvious nor sufficient. A theology of creation addresses the fact that the origin of the world is beyond human understanding, and is therefore rationally more satisfying, and two nature Christology is the most ambitious attempt at exploring the manifestation of the Creator within the context of human history without subverting the uniqueness of the Creator by human conceptualities.

2) How is this done? What is the method of the investigation?

I have chosen to focus on the works of four figures who in my view all work according to this perspective. They all try to show how the understanding of Christ as the union of the divine and the human is a better starting point for humans trying to orient themselves in the world than an anthropocentric starting point. These main figures are Nicholas Cusanus, Martin Luther, Johann Georg Hamann and Søren Kierkegaard.

3) Why discuss pre-Enlightenment thinkers as Cusanus and Luther in this context?

Here I build on scholarship that argue that both Cusanus and Luther engage with attempts in late medieval Scholasticism at constructing a consistently anthropocentric foundation of knowledge. They are both, and for partly the same reasons, critical of that attempt. I have written on Cusanus and Luther before, and found it natural to include them here. But the main part of the book is on Hamann and Kierkegaard.

4) Why Hamann and Kierkegaard?

Because they are both explicit about Christology as a point of orientation (think of Kierkegaard's *Philosophical Fragments*), and equally explicit about how they from this foundation build their critique of what they considered as an inconsistent, human-oriented rationality. Hamann addresses, among others, Herder, Moses Mendelssohn and Kant, and it is well known how Kierkegaard engaged critically with the thought of Hegel.

5) What do you consider as the main contribution of the book?

I think there are interesting things to be learned from looking at the four together. Hamann’s work was important for Kierkegaard, and even if Kierkegaard did not know Luther very well, there is an interesting trajectory of Lutheran thought from Luther to Kierkegaard that is refreshingly independent of the Luther reception in both Orthodoxy and Pietism. In my view, even much contemporary Luther scholarship lags behind Hamann in grasping the essentials of Luther’s thought. The inclusion of a pre-Reformation representative Roman-Catholic thinker like Cusanus hopefully adds to the ecumenical value of the investigation, as is only appropriate in an investigation of the significance of classical Christology.
6) Is the book considered mainly as a systematic theological investigation of the theology of creation and Christology, or is it mainly an historical investigation of the thought of the four main figures?

It is both. I engage critically with scholarship on both Cusanus, Luther, Hamann and Kierkegaard, and want to contribute to that discussion. At the same time, there are elements in the thought of the four that unite them, even if they were not aware of each other – Luther’s knowledge of Cusanus was superficial, and Hamann and Kierkegaard did not know him at all. Bringing these elements in play I consider as a contribution both to the historical investigation of the work of these thinkers and to the systematic theological discussion.
It has been the constant challenge of post-Enlightenment Christian theology to remain faithful to its defining convictions in a way that could meaningfully engage contemporary thought. We have seen the coming and going of a number of schools and thinkers who have committed themselves to one of these projects at the expense of the other. The task of the present investigation has been to see whether the attempts at engaging typically modern emphases through a consistent and radical application of the presuppositions and implications of the two nature Christology of the ancient church could be considered a successful attempt at paying due attention to both tasks at the same time. The investigation of the thought of Cusanus, Luther, Hamann, and Kierkegaard has given good reasons to answer this question in the positive.

The significant presupposition of the two nature Christology of the ancient confessions as appropriated by these four authors is that the difference between the infinite and the finite, or Creator and creation, has to be seen as absolute and unbridgeable. This from the outset subverts any attempt at integrating all elements of reality through a concept of universal and human-oriented reason; the human is not the center of the world. While in this way being impenetrable from the side of the human, the dividing line between Creator and creation still informs our understanding of what falls on our side of the line. This suggests a natural theology that is intent on exploring the conditions for faith and knowledge as the consistent way of applying one’s appreciation of the dividing line between Creator and creation while still keeping the space open for the inclusion of absolute difference in the shape of a person who is both infinite and finite. In this way, the difference between Creator and creation can be explored in its critical potential for evaluating competing worldviews that appear to be less consistent without unduly limiting the potential of God manifesting himself within the realm of the created in a way that does not conform to human expectations. While this particular way of relating natural and revealed theology is emphasized particularly strongly in the work of Kierkegaard, it still informs the thought also of the three other authors.

This investigation has shown both the critical and constructive potential of the understanding of absolute difference inherent in two nature Christology both with respect to the debates of early modernity and in relation to the thought of Kant and Hegel as the pillars of modernity’s understanding of itself. The final chapter has then applied this way of thinking as informed by the works of Cusanus, Luther, Hamann and Kierkegaard to some of the most fundamental problems of Christian theology: The understanding of God, the understanding of creation, the understanding of the human, the understanding of the person and work of Christ, the understanding of salvation and the understanding of the life of a Christian in faith and love. It has further been shown how this particular way of looking at God, the world, and the human can inform the debates on theological method, the relation between religion and science, and the relation between religion and politics, thus liberating us from the depressing and possibly disastrous attempt at doing this while relying on human resources alone.
“Alfsvåg’s work is a further contribution to the deconstruction of modernity. It draws on the critical and constructive potential of premodern insights deployed by Cusanus and Luther and retrieved by Hamann and Kierkegaard. These insights, in line with Scripture and Chalcedonian Christology, are then applied to key theological problems today. The book, which I highly recommend, is accessible to the general reader but written for the scholar.”

—Jeffrey Silcock, Australian Lutheran College / University of Divinity

“In this volume Knut Alfsvåg tests the relationship between Christianity, and more specifically Christology, and other modes of recent thought by a deep yet focused examination of the relevant positions of Nicolas of Cusa, Martin Luther, Johann Hamann, and Søren Kierkegaard . . . Ultimately, Alfsvåg argues that we would do well to consider the ties to created realities that ground the arguments of the early church as well as these select theologians, as we consider our own scientific, philosophical, and theological positions.”

—Tim Dost, Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, Missouri

“What is the relationship between the world and the human? Against the irrationality of modernism this study proffers a surprising answer: the indispensability of Christology. Drawing on a line of counter-cultural thinkers, Alfsvag draws out the implications for our time in stimulating fashion. This is a study of gravitas, with far-reaching significance.”

—Gordon L. Isaac, Gordon Conwell Theological Seminary