“Is it possible for the Eternal Word to be made manifest in a person with Down’s Syndrome?”

The Christian claim is that Eternal Word became flesh in Jesus of Nazareth. It was a first century Jew who became the definitive disclosure of God to humanity. In this essay, I wish to reflect on a conceptual question underpinning the Incarnation.¹ What do we expect from an Incarnation? Krishna, the eighth avatar of Vishnu, has explicit self-knowledge of his status and in Hindu theology his beauty is a central characteristic of his divinity.² Does the Incarnation require that the Eternal Word be a person who is exceptionally beautiful? Did God have other options beyond Jesus and what in Jesus is essential to the incarnation and what is contingent? Was it possible for the Eternal Word to be expressed in a woman or in a person with special needs? The case that brings many of these questions together is a person with Down’s Syndrome. Is it possible for the Eternal Word to be made manifest in a person with Down’s Syndrome?

Down’s Syndrome is a genetic condition, where a person has a full or partial additional copy of chromosome 21. The consequences are a lower IQ (often as much as half), certain distinctive characteristics (which include smaller statue and an upward slant to the eyes), and a disposition which is often humble, warm, and full of gratitude. A person with Down’s could easily reflect many of the most important features of God; for example, they can be very loving. But what about the other attributes of God – could God be disclosed in a person who is genetically unable to have a high IQ?

¹ In many ways, this is an exercise in what Oliver Crisp would call ‘analytic theology’ or perhaps ‘philosophical theology’.
² For a good discussion see Kristin Johnston Largen, Baby Krishna, Infant Christ: A Comparative Theology of Salvation, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books 2011). She explains that ‘Krishna is not only the most powerful god, the supreme god of the universe, but is also exceedingly beautiful, which is a central part of his perfection.’ (p.41)
This essay will begin by thinking through the link between Christology and intelligence. Traditionally, it has been assumed that the Incarnate Word must be extremely intelligent – indeed omniscience. We will look at the traditional reasons for linking Christology with omniscience. Then we will consider and develop a distinction between ‘wisdom’ and ‘omniscience’ and suggest that the Wisdom of God does not require nor entail omniscience, nor even above average intelligence. This will lead us to two conclusions; the first is that God could have been incarnate in a person with Down’s Syndrome (thereby ensuring the intrinsic dignity of this form of humanity); and the second is that we are free to let Jesus be who Jesus was and not force him into a Christology model that does not honor the Biblical text.

Christology, Intelligence, and Omniscience

For most Christians, intelligence is seen as an inevitable aspect of the Incarnation. At the very least, the Incarnate Word must be able to teach with authority and develop good arguments. Traditionally, the standard line in Christology is that Jesus is omniscient; this would mean that Jesus is extremely intelligent – after all, Jesus knows everything it is logically possible to know.

Now why has the tradition insisted on omniscience? It is Wolfhart Pannenberg in his classic Jesus – God and Man who has a sustained footnote on why this is a case. Pannenberg notes the irony that while patristic theologians consistently opposed docetic tendencies when it came to the suffering of Jesus (albeit in respect to his human nature), in respect to ‘the doctrine of Jesus’ knowledge, however, a docetic-Monophysite threat was continually present and occasionally dominant. Pannenberg suggests that this is in part a reaction to the Arians who argued against the divinity of Jesus partly on the basis of his ignorance. As Pannenberg goes on to note, it was only the Antiochene theologians who were able to concede some ignorance on the part of Jesus;

the Alexandrian tradition made sure that Jesus was omniscient. The net result is that time after
time, we find that Christ shares the divine knowledge.

In that vein, let me take two illustrations, starting with Anselm. His discussion of the knowledge
of Christ is found in book of Cur Deus Homo, chapter 13. Under the chapter heading ‘It is not
the case that along with our other infirmities He has ignorance’, Anselm sets out his commitment
to the omniscience of Jesus. Boso (his conversation partner in the dialogue) assumes that the
humanity of Jesus requires ignorance. Anselm explains:

The assumption of a human nature into the unity of a divine person will be done wisely
by Supreme Wisdom. And so Supreme Wisdom will not assume into its human nature
that which is not all useful … to the work which this man is going to do. Now, to be
sure, ignorance would be of no use to Him; instead, it would be of much harm. For
without great wisdom how would He do the very numerous and very great works which
He was going to do? Or how would men believe Him if they knew He was ignorant?
…Furthermore, if only what is known is loved, then just as there would not be any good
which He did not love, so there would not be any good which He did not know. But only
one who knows how to discern good from evil has a complete knowledge of good.
…Therefore, He will know everything, even though He will not publicly display all of
His knowledge in His association with other men.4

The argument here is interesting. Jesus must be omniscient because (a) he is God, and (b)
because this is the basis of his authority of the divine. Anselm then identifies three areas

4 Jasper Hopkins and Herbert Richardson (eds and translators), Anselm of Canterbury, volume 3, (Toronto and New
York: Edwin Mellen Press 1976), p.135. I am grateful to Daniel Deme has a good summary of Anselm’s position,
which put simply is that ‘the man Jesus will never have ignorance with regard to his humanity. … [T]his man will be
omniscient, even if he will not always manifest it in public.’ See Daniel Deme, The Christology of Anselm of
requiring this authority; these are in respect to the miraculous, in respect to attracting disciples, and in respect to the moral realm.

Offering a less rigid view of Jesus’ omniscience is Thomas Aquinas. He gives the issue of the knowledge of Christ sustained attention in the *Summa Theologiae*. For Aquinas, the Eternal Word assumed a human nature which was perfect and integral. The question in the *Tertia pars* is this: how exactly did Christ possess these perfections? For Aquinas, ‘Christ had beatific knowledge’, which Aquinas explains is embedded within ‘the soul of Christ, which is a part of his human nature’. However, Aquinas also wants Jesus to learn and grow in knowledge; so he develops a distinction between ‘experimental knowledge’ - this is knowledge from experience, which is acquired - and imprinted, divine knowledge. With the latter, Jesus is omniscient or as Aquinas puts it, ‘Therefore it would seem that by the knowledge infused by the Holy Spirit Christ knew everything’; with the former, Christ had an active intellect which led to learning of human activities. So Aquinas writes,

‘The human mind looks in two directions. It looks to what is above it – and it was in this line that the soul of Christ was filled with infused knowledge. But it also looks to what is beneath it, to the data of the imagination, which is meant to move the human mind by the power of the active intellect. The soul of Christ had also to be filled with knowledge along this line; not that the previous complement of knowledge would not of itself be

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6 Ibid., 3a, 9, 3, p.91  
7 Ibid., 3a, 11, 1, p.123
enough for the human mind, but because the mind had also to be filled through its dealings with the imagination.8

For Aquinas, it is part of the perfection of the human Jesus that he learned.9 Aquinas writes, ‘The habit of knowledge is acquired from the association of the human mind with the imagination.’10 But there is more. In his discussion of this section of the *Summa*, Corey L. Barnes stresses the importance of this form of knowledge because it was a condition of the freewill of Jesus. Barnes explains that for Aquinas, ‘Christ willed the passion with full knowledge of its pains and outcomes.’11

Although Aquinas distinguishes between different types of knowledge (thereby creating some flexibility for the accumulation of knowledge in Jesus), he shares with Anselm a sense that the knowledge of Jesus is considerable; it includes the beatific vision and infused knowledge. For both, the Incarnation, conceptually, needs an omniscient (or almost omniscient) human. This is a long way from a person with Down’s.

Interestingly, most theologians have worried about an omniscient Jesus on the grounds that this undermines the humanity of Jesus.12 For the child Jesus to know every name in the New York

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8 Ibid., 3a. 9, 4, p.99.
9 Michael Gorman is helpful here. The perfections are in Christ insofar as it furthers the salvific mission. Therefore Gorman points out when it comes to knowledge: ‘Christ’s human knowledge was as extensive as human knowledge could be: he had the beatific vision, full infused knowledge, and full acquired knowledge. Of his possession of the beatific vision, Aquinas notes that this enabled Christ to be, in virtue of his humanity, the source of truth for other humans. He also had a human will and the ability to perform authentically human actions.’ See Michael Gorman, ‘Incarnation’, in Brian Davies and Eleonore Stump (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Aquinas*, (New York: Oxford University Press 2012), p.430.
12 One solution that I am not discussing in this paper is to build on the two natures distinction embedded in the Definition of Chalcedon. On this view one confines omniscience to the divine nature of Jesus and limited knowledge is then part of the human nature. A number of writers take this line. Thomas Morris in *The Logic of God Incarnate* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press 1986) p.103ff argues for the ‘two minds view’. This
telephone directory and be able to recite every cricket score of every cricket match makes Jesus an odd child. As Pannenberg observes:

[T]o attribute to the soul of Jesus a knowledge of all things past, present, and future, and of everything that God knows from the very beginning, in the sense of a supernatural vision, makes the danger more than considerable that the genuine humanity of Jesus’ experiential life would be lost. 13

This traditional criticism does have some force; however, I want to argue for a different position. The Eternal Word (or for the sake of this argument let us use the phrase Divine Wisdom) does not require omniscience (in the sense of knowing everything); indeed, the Divine Wisdom does not need a conventional intelligence. In fact, human intelligence can make knowledge of the divine harder and less accessible because the immediacy of the spiritual can be lost through the overly complex rational interpretative processes, with which we interpret the spiritual.14 Let us develop this argument by turning to the concept of the Divine Wisdom.

Divine Wisdom

There is no doubt that the ‘Wisdom tradition’ of the Old Testament is a powerful inspiration for the developing Christology of the New Testament.15 This is especially true of the Gospel of

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14 In our post-Kantian age, I do accept that every experience entails interpretation. However, I do think the sense of the spiritual needs to be experienced in ways that do not allow the filters of reductionist materialism to obscure the true nature of experience. Without romanticizing children, I do think that often children can see and know things in ways that adults could see and know, but fail to do so because a crude empiricism dominates the adult realm of knowing. I am grateful for the clarifying help of my colleagues Joyce Mercer and James Farwell on this point. I discuss this question further in my Against Atheism, (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell 2010), pp.52-58.
15 Wisdom tradition is in quotation marks because I recognize it is not really a tradition. It is Stuart Weeks who has in a variety of places argued against the distinct wisdom tradition. Instead it sees it as a much more fluid
John. The combination of Genesis one (‘In the beginning God’ finds an echo in ‘In the beginning was the Word’) with the Wisdom tradition (especially of Proverbs 8) becomes a powerful mechanism to capture the significance and impact of Jesus. For the author of John’s Gospel, Jesus embodies the Eternal Word – the Eternal Wisdom of God; it is in Jesus we can see what God is like.

The Old Testament source for this characterization of Wisdom is Proverbs 8. She is one of two female figures; the other being the ‘foreign woman’. Of Wisdom, Proverbs writes:

The LORD created me at the beginning of his work,
the first of his acts of long ago.
Ages ago I was set up,
at the first, before the beginning of the earth.
When there were no depths I was brought forth,
when there were no springs abounding with water.
Before the mountains had been shaped,
before the hills, I was brought forth—
when he had not yet made earth and fields,
or the world’s first bits of soil.
When he established the heavens, I was there,
when he drew a circle on the face of the deep,
when he made firm the skies above,

movement where the literature is ‘intended more to entertain and provoke than deliberately to persuade its readers to adopt any particular understanding of the world.’ Stuart Weeks, ‘Wisdom in the Old Testament’, in Stephen Barton (ed), Where Shall Wisdom Be Found? Wisdom in the Bible, the Church and the Contemporary World, (Edinburgh: T&T Clark 1999), p.29.
when he established the fountains of the deep,
when he assigned to the sea its limit,
so that the waters might not transgress his command,
when he marked out the foundations of the earth, then I was beside him, like a master
worker;
and I was daily his delight,
rejoicing before him always,
rejoicing in his inhabited world
and delighting in the human race. (Proverbs 8:22-31 NRSV)

Wisdom is personified; Wisdom is with God; Wisdom was beside God; Wisdom rejoices and
participates in the Creation. Here is an aspect of God which is dynamic and has agency. James
D. G. Dunn is right when he recognizes that in the Gospel of John, ‘there is no doubt that Jesus is
presented as Wisdom incarnate.’ However, it is not simply in the Gospel of John. The wisdom
theme is also present in Matthew’s Gospel. The Q source seems to be deliberately edited by
Matthew to make sure that there is a wisdom Christology. For Matthew, writes Dunn, Jesus is
presented more like ‘the embodiment of divine Wisdom.’ And some have seen a wisdom
Christology in Luke, where Jesus talks of himself as the ‘go-between’ for God and the world
(Luke 10:22). In addition, Paul writing in Corinthians explicitly describes Christ as the
wisdom of God (1 Corinthians 1:24). For the early church, this was language that made perfect
sense of the incarnation.

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17 Ibid., p78
18 I am grateful to Joyce Mercer for this observation.
The feminist theologians have made this central to their Christology. Both Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza and Elizabeth Johnson draw heavily on the feminine personification of Wisdom within the Jewish tradition. For Schüssler Fiorenza, the initial reflections on Jesus were all sophiology, which got submerged by patriarchy. Indeed Schüssler Fiorenza writes:

ÀWhen one moves from Jewish Wisdom literature to early Christian writing the figure of Divine Wisdom seems to disappear. Yet a symptomatic reading, which attends to traces and tensions inscribed in the text, can show that a submerged theology of Wisdom, or sophiology, permeates all of Christian Scriptures.\textsuperscript{19}

For Schüssler Fiorenza, we are recovering a tradition, which can destabilize contemporary more masculine Christologies. This is ‘one but not the only early Christian discourse that might open up unfulfilled possibilities for feminist liberation theology’.\textsuperscript{20} Schüssler Fiorenza writes:

ÀA rediscovery of Wisdom traditions does not invite us to repeat the language of early Jewish-Christian Wisdom theology. Rather it compels us to continue the struggle with conventional masculine language for G\*d and the exclusivist authoritarian functions and implications of such language. Feminist theology must rearticulate the symbols, images, and names of Divine Sophia in the context of our own experiences and theological struggles in such a way that the ossified and absolutized masculine language about G\*d and Christ is radically questioned and undermined and the Western cultural sex/gender system is radically deconstructed.\textsuperscript{21}

\textsuperscript{19} Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, see Jesus. Miriam’s Son, Sophia’s Prophet, (New York: Continuum 1994), p.139.

\textsuperscript{20} Ibid., p.157

\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., p.162. Schüssler Fiorenza has a convention of following the Jewish practice of not reproducing the name of God (hence G*\textsuperscript{d}) as a way of challenging the traditional patriarchal image of God.
The vision here is that the very recovery of this submerged Wisdom strand creates an intrinsic openness about our understanding of God. Traditional male christologies are seen as a conclusion (we now know what God is like because we have the definitive disclosure), while a sophialogy leaves a continuing openness, which from a feminist perspective is good.

Elizabeth Johnson has also made the recovery of Sophia as a way of challenging the patriarchy embedded in classical Christology. She argued that the ‘Jewish figure of personified Wisdom (Hokmah in Hebrew, Sophia in Greek)’ enabled ‘the fledgling Christian community to attribute cosmic significance to the crucified Jesus, relating him to the creation and governance of the world, and was an essential step in the development of incarnational christology.’ For Johnson, a recognition of the genesis of the Biblical understanding of the Christ in female imagery provides a justification for feminine imagery of God. So she talks about the Spirit-Sophia, Jesus-Sophia, and Mother-Sophia. For Johnson, if you see Jesus through Sophia, then you can see the ministry of Jesus in a different way. Don Schweitzer accurately summarizes Johnson’s position as follows:

> The quest for the historical Jesus shows that what was characteristic of Jesus as Sophia/Christ was not his sex but the liberating gestalt of his ministry, which brough liberation from an oppressive status quo to women and men. It was this, not his sexuality, that led to his death and thus to his resurrection/vindication as the Christ.

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Through his resurrection, Jesus becomes present in all those, male and female, who
gather in his name and live out his message in redemptive ways.  

For Johnson, the significance of Sophia is enough to change our perception of Jesus; the focus
shifts to everyday living within the kingdom, inclusion, and relationship-building.  

There is, in my view, a persuasive argument that recognizes that Sophia language is an important
and faithful Biblical Christology. While I do want to safeguard an ‘authoritative’ revelation
disclosed in the Eternal Wisdom made flesh (so in that respect would want to disagree with
Schüssler Fiorenza), it is important to recognize that the type of Christology emerging from the
Sophia tradition is different. It has a different tone to the christologies of Anselm and Aquinas.
And this different tone can been seen when we contrast Elizabeth Johnson with Anselm.  

For Anselm, we need the omniscience of Jesus for reasons of authority. This creates the Jesus of
power who can perform miracles, attract disciples and provide moral clarity. For Elizabeth
Johnson, the tradition of Sophia stresses inclusion, justice, and participation. Omniscience
promises that all answers are provided. Wisdom actually invites us to a place which is more
paradoxical. As Stephen Barton observes,

‘for wisdom is not just a body of knowledge, it is also a way of seeing which attends to
what lies hidden as well as to what lies on the surface. Insofar as it attends to what is
hidden, wisdom is a way of seeing which has the potential for being innovative,

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25 I am happy to recognize a debt to Karl Barth here. If we are going to know what God is like, then we need to
trust that God has spoken. The disclosure of God in the Eternal Wisdom made flesh is our control on our theology.
Any legitimate affirmation about God and God’s relations with the world need to justified, grounded in, or
deduced from the Incarnation. See my Understanding Christian Doctrine (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell 2008), chapter
7, for further discussion.
paradoxical, ironic and subversive. Here, the place of the wise is taken by the fool, the place of the strong by the weak, the place of the mature by the child.\textsuperscript{26}

Wisdom is not knowledge of every true proposition; instead wisdom can see the simple truths within the complexity. Wisdom implies an open-endedness; a wise person never assumes that they know everything; there is always more to learn.\textsuperscript{27}

The argument here is simple: conceptually, when we think about what an Incarnation involves, we do not need a God-man who is able to speak every language or know the number of calories in every type of soda. Neither of these skills would disclose to us the nature of God. Such skills would just reveal a God of a parlor tricks. Instead, our need is for a life from which we can learn of the love, compassion, and radical call for inclusion.

Incarnation and a Down’s Person

Herein allow me a confession: much as I love Jesus, part of me wishes that instead of a Jewish male, the Eternal Wisdom had taken the form of a person with Down’s Syndrome. In my experience a Down’s Person is a much more reliable vehicle for disclosing the life of God than most other people. Their obligation to live in the present, their deep compassion and empathy, their sense of fun, and their exceptional capacity for inclusion are all built in; their very biology makes them ideal vehicles for the disclosure of God.

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{26} Stephen C. Barton, ‘Gospel Wisdom’ in Stephen Barton (ed), \textit{Where Shall Wisdom Be Found? Wisdom in the Bible, the Church and the Contemporary World}, (Edinburgh: T&T Clark 1999), p.94.}

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{27} To talk of Jesus as the Wisdom of God opens up possibilities. Colin Gunton has a radical inclusivity when he explains that the Wisdom of God embodied in Christ embodies all the wisdom of even non-Christian cultures. So Gunton writes, ‘To say that the crucified Christ is the Wisdom of God is to say that he is the key to the meaning of the whole of the created order, and therefore the source of true wisdom, wherever that is to be found.’ Colin Gunton, ‘Christ, the Wisdom of God’, in Stephen Barton (ed), \textit{Where Shall Wisdom Be Found? Wisdom in the Bible, the Church and the Contemporary World}, (Edinburgh: T&T Clark 1999), p.260.}
It is true that if God had been incarnate in a person with Down’s, then there would have been a different teaching style. The parables and stories would have been different. The conversations with opponents would have to resort less to logical argument and more to intuitive assertion. But this could have all worked: humanity near such a life could still see the reality of God residing in that life in unique way. It could have still been a life that provoked worship from those around that life.

Now much is made of the challenge of a male Jesus for women. The objection is simple: the experiences of men and women are distinctive; Jesus never knew the challenge of the menstrual cycle or the distinctive experience of childbirth. So how can a male Jesus be representative of all humanity?

The standard answer is simple: to be a human one has to be a particular human. You have to be born into a family, at a certain time, or a certain gender. Although the Incarnation could have taken a variety of forms, it did need to be a form – a particular person. And the Jewishness, maleness, and first centuryness are all part of what it is to be a human person.

However, it is also recognized that the fact that Jesus was male does not mean and cannot mean that woman are not complete full forms of humanity. So the first reason why this exercise matters is simple this: it is important for Christian theologians to stress that a person with special needs are complete and full forms of humanity. We recognize that it is a contingent fact that the Incarnation took the form of a first century male and not a logically necessary one. In the same way that God could have been incarnated as a woman, so I am arguing God could have been incarnated as a person with Down’s.
Election is a mystery. It was the Jewish people who were chosen; it was Mary the mother of Jesus who gave birth to the Christ. Jesus was able-bodied; Jesus was male; and Jesus spoke Aramaic and was heavily shaped by a Jewish apocalyptic worldview. One important purpose of this exercise is that once one recognizes that conceptually God could have taken the form of a person with Downs, then we can liberate our study of the New Testament and let Jesus be Jesus.

The joy of this argument is that Bart Ehrman could be right and Jesus could still be God. Once we let go some of the classical expectations that we have of Incarnation, we are free to be more gentle with Jesus. So Bart Ehrman see Jesus as an apocalyptic prophet.\textsuperscript{28} According to this picture, Jesus saw himself as an agent, who is ushering in the end of the age. It was to be a literal kingdom of God, where the forces of wickedness will be overthrown, and a new set of values will dominate the community. Now if this picture of Jesus is right, then it is long way from the omniscient Jesus of the classical Christology. For Ehrman, Jesus did not think he was God; he was not omniscient; instead he was mistaken in many ways. However, if the Incarnation of the Wisdom of God does not require an omniscient Jesus or even a Jesus as intelligent as Einstein, then perhaps this ‘deluded’ Jesus might still be that embodiment of God.

Like every human being, Jesus is limited by the culture into which he is born. Yet those closest to him recognized in him an encounter with God. They also struggled with their expectations. The idea of ‘messiah’ carried a set of connotations that Jesus constantly evaded. However, as Larry Hurtado has pointed out, these monotheistic Jews still found themselves worshipping the God embodied in this person.\textsuperscript{29} For all the limitations of the man, the divine came shining

\textsuperscript{28} See Bart D. Ehrman, \textit{Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophet of the New Millennium} (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1999). I am not assuming that Ehrman is necessarily right in the details of his portrait; instead, I am arguing that even if he were it is perfectly possible that Jesus could still be the Eternal Wisdom made flesh.

\textsuperscript{29} See Larry W. Hurtado, \textit{Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity}, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003).
through. Questions about the intelligence of Jesus or whether Jesus was inaccurately in his predications about the end of the world or even the knowledge of Jesus about his own status and access to the Father are now relegated to a secondary status. Indeed one could argue that it is important for the embodiment of the Divine Sophia to have these limitations. The coming of the Spirit promises to take us further into the mystery of God; Jesus is a definitive disclosure of God (a control on our theology), but not a comprehensive disclosure.

Conclusion

The question was simple: is it possible for the Eternal Word to be made manifest in a person with Down’s Syndrome? The answer I have suggested is an overwhelming affirmative. It is indeed possible. It is possible because the classical expectation of divine omniscience is mistaken; it is possible because we recognize that underpinning the logos language is Sophia language; it is possible because wisdom is different from knowledge of countless propositional facts; and it is possible because a person with Down’s is a complete form of humanity.

Turning from possibility to what God actually did in Christ, the delightful conclusion of this paper is that we need to worry less about defending a particular account of Jesus. Jesus need not meet the classical expectations for his life; he can be who he was. It is still perfectly possible

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30 In some ways this is a defense of a kenotic Christology, although I am hesitant to formulate the precise form this took. I prefer to talk about the Eternal Wisdom interpenetrating a human life (see my Understanding Christian Doctrine, p.129-30). This would mean it is not a ‘transformational model’ (of, for example, Trenton Merricks) nor is it just relational. It is a more like a ‘spirit-filled’ Christology. Jonathan Hill’s map of the current options in the debate is very helpful, see Anna Marmodoro and Jonathan Hill, The Metaphysics of the Incarnation, (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2011), chapter one.
that a person with a limited cultural horizon could bring to us the wisdom of God. This is the Christian claim; this is the Christian affirmation.\textsuperscript{31}

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