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Toward A Christian
Theology of Religious Pluralism

Before proceeding further, some clarifications are, however, required which bear on the meaning of terms. First of all, there is talk here about the "uniqueness" of Jesus Christ, not of Christianity. Enough has been said previously to the effect that a Christocentric perspective must take the place of an ecclesiocentric perspective, too narrow to allow for a theology of religions (see pp. 185-186, above). This point need not be repeated, except to note that the wrong question about the "absoluteness of Christianity" has often been asked in the past. Hegel affirmed it in the framework of his idealistic philosophy; Ernst Troeltsch relativized it from the viewpoint of the history of religions (Troeltsch 1971; see Bernhardt 1994, 95-100; 1993, 144-208; see also Dupuis 1991b, 93-104); Karl Barth admitted it inasmuch as Christianity is the embodiment of saving faith in Jesus Christ, distinct from the Christian religion (see Bernhardt 1994, 83-85); Paul Tillich uttered prophetic protests against all self-absolutizing of religions (see Bernhardt 1994, 113-14). Karl Rahner used the expression "absoluteness of Christianity," perhaps unadvisedly, in the sense of its "uniqueness" (Rahner 1988a, 1973). Here, however, talk about "absoluteness" will be consistently avoided, with regard both to Jesus Christ and, a fortiori, to Christianity. The reason is that absoluteness is an attribute of the Ultimate Reality of Infinite Being which must not be predicated of any finite reality, even the human existence of the Son-of-God-made-man. That Jesus Christ is "universal" Savior does not make him the "Absolute Savior"² — who is God himself.³

This being said, many ambiguities remain over the terminology by which theologians express what distinguishes Jesus Christ from other saving figures, and Christianity from other traditions. We have noted earlier those ambiguities (see pp. 181-182, above; see also Dupuis 1995c, 128-31). Let it suffice to recall, where "oneness" (or "uniqueness") and "universality" are concerned, that both terms can be understood either in a "relative" or a "singular" sense (see Moran 1992). "Relative uniqueness" refers to the original character of every person or tradition, in its difference from others; "singular uniqueness" is said of Jesus Christ as the constitutive Savior of humankind. Similarly, "relative universality" indicates the universal appeal which various saving figures or religious tradi-

2. The expression is used repeatedly by Karl Rahner. See Rahner 1978, 193-95, 204-6, 279-80, 318-21.

3. See C. F. Braaten, who writes: "Absoluteness is rather a predicate of the God of the eschatological Kingdom proclaimed by Jesus as the power of the universal future in relation to the whole of God's Kingdom, which includes the entire sweep of the history of religions. The presence of the eschatological Kingdom in Jesus and in the apostolic mission is the anticipation of the future of all religions as well as the entire religious life of humanity. These other religions are not striving after nothingness or false religion, but are seeking union with the Divine Mystery that the Christian Gospel announces."

tions can possibly make on people as representing diverse paths to salvation; "singular universality" implies once again that Jesus Christ is the constitutive universal Savior. In both cases, the "relative" usage runs the risk of leading to a broad pluralism falling short of the Christian claim, while the restricted usage may be exposed to a narrow exclusivism. The first appears reductionist, while the other smacks of intransigence. How to avoid the pitfall on either side?

Elsewhere, I have suggested that uniqueness and universality need to be combined if we would wish to propound an open theology of religions. I wrote: "Oneness and universality: We must find a way of combining both and holding them together. . . . Without universality, uniqueness is exclusivism. Without uniqueness, universality would lead us down the pluralist path. In combination, however, the notes of uniqueness and universality accord with . . . inclusive Christology" (Dupuis 1991b, 192).

However this may be, the uniqueness and universality of Jesus Christ, as understood here, are neither "relative" nor "absolute." They are "constitutive," insofar as Jesus Christ holds saving significance for the whole of humankind and the Christ-event — in particular the Paschal Mystery of Christ's death and resurrection — is "cause" of salvation.⁴ It is "relational," insofar as the person and the event insert themselves in an overall design of God for humankind which is multifaceted and whose realization in history is made up of diverse times and moments. Jesus Christ, it will be suggested, is, among different saving figures in whom God is hiddenly present and operative, the one "human face" in whom God, while remaining unseen, is fully disclosed and revealed. Throughout human history God has willed to be "in many various ways" (Heb 1:1) a God-of-people; in Jesus Christ he became God-of-people-in-a-fully-human-way (see Jn 1:14): the Em-manu-el (Mt 1:23) (see Dupuis 1991b, 101-2).

The chapter is divided into two main sections. The first section reasserts the constitutive uniqueness of Jesus Christ in the context of the present questioning on the part of pluralist theologians. This implies reassessing the evidence put forward by the Christian sources, encountering the contrasting claims made by other religious traditions for their respective saving figures, and a hermeneutics of Christological faith in the context of religious pluralism and dialogue. The second section aims to bring out the relational character of Jesus Christ's uniqueness and universality. To this end, it shows the distinction-in-identity of Jesus with the Christ, the coincidence in him of the particular and the universal. In a Trinitarian Christological perspective, it suggests how the one "human face" of God may be said to relate to other saving figures from which God has not withheld his saving presence and grace. Jesus Christ is thus seen as the "concrete universal," in whom all advances of God to human beings in history

4. Karl Rahner (1979) explains that the causality of Christ's death on the cross in the order of salvation must be conceived as quasi-sacramental rather than efficient. The cross does not cause salvation by determining God's salvific will; it is God's salvific will that results in Christ's death on the cross. He writes: "We must say: Because God wills salvation . . ."

are summed up and "re-headed" (see Eph 1:10). The philosophical and biblical questions raised by the revisionist Christology of pluralists are dealt with in the first part; those concerned with theology are deferred to the second part.

I. One Saving Figure among Others?

A. *The Christian Tradition Revisited*

That the theocentric paradigm in the theology of religions is based on a revisionist Christology which may be described as "degree" Christology is certain. It is plainly admitted by the protagonists of the pluralistic model themselves, John Hick⁵ and Paul F. Knitter,⁶ in particular. The nuances which the latter has introduced lately in his Christological position do not change the situation substantially.⁷ A thorough critical study of the various considerations on which this revisionist Christology is based cannot be attempted here.⁸ They must nevertheless be reviewed and evaluated rapidly; emphasis will be laid on the historical-critical-exegetical considerations.

Where the *philosophical* presuppositions are concerned, it is claimed that the newly acquired historical consciousness leads to a relativizing of truth. Static and eternal truth has given way to one which is dynamic and historical. There follows a "deabsolutizing" and a "deobjectifying" of truth, truth being always dependent on the knower's preconceptions and subject to change. "Objective" knowledge is a myth, in the face of which all claims to the "possession" of truth are rejected; all the more so any claim to "absolute" truth. Leonard Swidler (1990, 7-14) sums up the new situation in six points:

5. John Hick refers primarily to the following authors: Baillie 1963; Pittenger 1970; Knox 1967; Lampe 1977; Hick, ed., 1977. Also explicitly professing a "low" or "degree" Christology are, among other authors: Robinson 1973; Macquarrie 1992.

6. In *No Other Names!* Paul F. Knitter rebelled heavily, besides John Hick and S. J. Samartha, on the following: Cobb 1975; Ranschow 1982; Driver 1981; Tillich 1957, vol. 2; Ogden 1961.

7. In *Jesus and the Other Names*, Knitter's Christology has undergone some changes, also in terminology (see 171, n. 13). He now professes that Jesus is universal, decisive, indispensable, while denying that God's revelation in him is full, definitive, insurmountable (72-80). He holds a "relational uniqueness" (80) of Jesus, by which no distinctive uniqueness is meant (79). He writes: "To affirm Jesus as truly God's Word is to award him a distinctiveness that is his alone; to add that he is not *solely* God's Word is also to see that distinctiveness as one that has to be brought into relationship with other possible Words. Jesus is a Word that can be understood only in conversations with other Words" (80). Knitter suggests that "the title Spirit-filled Prophet be used as a hermeneutical flashlight to understand the many Christological titles given Jesus in the New Testament" (92; see 131). To profess him as "truly the Son of God and universal Savior" means to recognize him as "God's sacrament, as the embodiment, the historical reality, the symbol, the story that makes God real and effective for me" (105, emphasis added). It is difficult to see how this Christology corresponds — to mention only one name referred to by Knitter (see 105) — to that of Karl Rahner, for whom Jesus Christ is the "absolute Savior" of humankind. For Knitter, even in this latest work, Jesus Christ is not to be understood in terms of his unique personal identity as Son of God; accordingly, a "constitutive Christology according to which Jesus, especially in his death and resurrection, causes or constitutes the universal availability of God's salvific love" is untenable (133). See, however, Swidler and Moizes, eds., 1996.

8. Such work has already been done where John Hick is concerned; see specially D'Costa 1987; Carruthers 1990. See also O'Collins 1995b. On S. J. Samartha, see Klootwijk 1992; Man 1993. No such critical work has yet been published on the Christology of Paul F. Knitter.

(1) All truth now holds only in relation to the historical context in which it was produced, i.e. it is historically conditioned and thus involved in constant change. (2) In addition to this historical conditioning there is the orientation of actions, i.e. the intention behind a practical action. (3) Truth is related to a standpoint; i.e. the cultural milieu in which the speaker and hearer of a communication of truth live, the class they belong to and their sex have an influence on the truth communicated. (4) Truth is bound up with language and thus limited to its frontiers; in other words, it always expresses a partial, selective, perspectivist view of reality. (5) Truth is subject to interpretation, i.e. all experience relates back to a horizon of understanding, to the preunderstanding of the person experiencing it. The knower is involved in the knowledge since he or she knows in his or her way (as Thomās Aquinas recognized). There can be no such thing as purely objective, absolute knowledge, detached from the knowing subject. (6) Truth is dialogical, i.e. knowledge is achieved not in the mode of a one-sided acceptance of givens but reciprocally in dialogue with reality following the model of question and answer. (See Bernhardt 1994, 119)

And Bernhardt concludes:

If we take these six tendencies together — and it is certainly impossible to make a sharp distinction between them — we can say that "truth" no longer means absolute, i.e. detached, isolated, unconditional statements about reality. It is relational, and stands in relation to a network which is conditioned by many factors. But above all it is related to the one who receives it and expresses it; it is and remains tied to this person's point of view, perspective and language. There can no longer be any question of absoluteness in the sense of something that transcends time and culture, is independent of worldview and set apart from history. (Bernhardt 1994, 119)

What this conclusion shows clearly, however, is that Swidler and others are claiming to enjoy higher ground, above and beyond all the particular perspectives. This, in fact, looks very much like making an absolute objective judgment about the allegedly subjective and relative nature of any truth available to others with their limited worldviews.

Some clarifications are in order here. Truth, or reality, in itself needs to be distinguished from our human knowledge of it. That all human apprehension of Divine Reality is fragmentary and time-conditioned is certain; human knowledge of God — even after God's revelation in Jesus Christ — remains irremediably imperfect and provisional. This does not, however, invalidate it entirely, neither on the philosophical plane, much less on the theological, where it is founded on God's own word. Furthermore, while our apprehension of the Divine Mystery is "relative," God's mystery in itself (*an sich*) is "absolute": God is truth; he alone knows himself absolutely.

Applying these observations to the person of Jesus Christ, we can make the following points. We have remarked earlier about the "relative" character that necessarily affects the human consciousness of the Son-of-God-made-human; this does not, however, prevent it from being a privileged channel through which the Divine Mystery is truthfully disclosed to us (see p. 249, above). If the human awareness of the Son-of-God-made-man remains irremediably relative, this is a fortiori true of all knowledge which humans receive through him of the Divine Mystery. "Relative" does not, however, say invalid; and while the Divine Mystery will always lie beyond our grasp — *Deus semper maior* — the disclosure of it in "one who is Son" (Heb 1:1) offers special credentials to truthfulness. While, then, "God's truth, which is certainly one 'in itself' can only present itself in the plurality of particular views of the truth" (Bernhardt 1994, 126), it does not necessarily follow that all particular views of the truth have equivalent significance. Admittedly, in the Bible itself, the truth of God is historical and concrete; it concerns God's "truthfulness" and faithfulness but is never exhausted in history. The message of Jesus Christ too "stands under an 'eschatological proviso,'" inasmuch as final truth remains in store for full disclosure in the "not-yet" of the eschaton (Bernhardt 1994, 125). This notwithstanding, from the vantage point of Christian faith, the testimony of Jesus Christ and the witness borne to it by the foundational faith of the Apostolic Church as recorded in the New Testament have the privileged authority which attaches to the revealed word of God. The New Testament witness to the oneness and universality of Jesus Christ needs to be taken seriously.

Coming, then, to the *historical-critical-exegetical* considerations underlying the revisionist Christology of the pluralist paradigm, we may distinguish two basic attitudes. There are those who simply state in general terms that claims to uniqueness in the New Testament must be relativized, inasmuch as the context of the relevant passages either refers to the Jews or can at least be understood as bearing an exclusively Jewish reference.⁹ Others readily acknowledge the New Testament's massive assertion of the uniqueness of Jesus Christ the Savior but ask whether this assertion still can or ought to be upheld today in the current context of religious pluralism.

The main texts directly concerned are Jn 14:6; Acts 4:12; and 1 Tim 2:5-6. To these can be added, among others, the Christological hymns of the Pauline and Deutero-Pauline letters, such as Eph 1:1-13 and Col 1:15-20. Elsewhere, I have observed that the uniqueness of Jesus Christ is in a true sense the message of the New Testament in its entirety, the deep faith that underlies the whole, which gives it its *raison d'être*, and without which it would not have been written (see Dupuis 1991b, 94). How must it be interpreted in our present context?

Various reasons are suggested for relativizing the statements of uniqueness.

9. See Rayan 1990, 133-38, where the author refers to Acts 4:12; Mt 28:18-20. As for 1 Tim 2:4-6,

Recent hermeneutic investigations show that such claims actually result from a historically conditioned worldview and language modes dependent on a particular cultural context. We can no longer regard that uniqueness precisely as the "referent" of the Gospel message — the intangible kernel of the Christian kerygma (see Knitter 1985, 182-86; see also Tracy 1975, 72-79, 131-36).

It is also pointed out that in the context of the Jewish apocalyptic mentality, impregnated as it was with an eschatological expectancy, it was natural for the primitive Church to interpret the experience of God in Jesus Christ as final and unsurpassable. But this apocalyptic mentality was and is culturally limited. The finality it implies for the Jesus Christ-event, therefore, cannot be regarded as pertaining to the essence of Christianity; it belongs rather to the fortuitous cultural context in which it was first experienced and presented. If Jesus had been encountered and interpreted in some other cultural context, involving some other philosophy of history, he would have been considered neither final nor unique.¹⁰

Saint Paul is often held to bear the responsibility for the explicit assertion of the uniqueness of Jesus Christ. It is suggested that if the apostle had entered into contact with the rich mystical traditions of the oriental religions, he would have softened his sweeping, unnuanced assertions. Or again, this time with regard to Saint John, it is observed that the uniqueness of Jesus Christ is articulated in terms of "incarnation," but this is a mythical modality of thought, like the concept of preexistence with which it is bound up. But mythical language ought to be taken for what it is — "poetry, not prose" — and thus understood not "literally" but "metaphorically" (John Hick).¹¹ The incarnation must therefore be demythologized. The result would be the demythologization of Jesus Christ as universal Savior, a concept now recognized as belonging to a mythic mode of thought and hence not involving literal meaning (see Hick 1973, 148-79; 1993b; Hick, ed., 1977; McFadden 1974; Robinson 1973; Hick and Knitter, eds., 1987).

Finally, it is remarked that, in the historical context in which Christianity arose, and in the face of the opposition it encountered, it was natural for the disciples to present Jesus' "way" as unique. This absolute language is historically conditioned. It is survival language (see Baum 1974). Or, in Paul F. Knitter's interpretation, it is "action language" or "performative language" — that is, language designed to invite disciples to earnest following (see Knitter 1996, 68-69).

Apocalyptic, mythical-metaphorical, survival, performative — even "love language" has been mentioned.¹² R. Bernhardt sums it all up under the rubric of confession and doxology. He writes:

10. This is already suggested in Cupitt 1975; see also Hick 1973, 108-19.

11. This assessment of poetry is unfortunate: poetry no less than prose can refer truthfully to objective reality. Furthermore, the use of the term "metaphor" also seems inaccurate: metaphors extend ordinary linguistic usage and frequently, no less than literal language, make objectively true claims.

12. Knitter 1985, 184-86. We have already furnished, on biblical evidence, a short rebuttal of these invidious suggestions, in Dupuis 1991b, 198-99.

[The texts] are not decrees of eternal truths of God without a situation, revealed by Christ about himself, but confessions of him by his disciples and followers. They are not to be understood as metaphysical assertions about divine facts but as an existential expression of unconditional commitment and obligation, as an expression of trust and hope in situations which are desperate.

What stand out here as totalitarian claims to absoluteness are "statements in the witness box," personal or community testimony. Such statements first of all express the depth and seriousness of the person's own relationship to God in the face of external threats. The power of God is adduced against the powers from which the danger stems. One might almost say that this power is conjured up. So the Bible's supposed claims to absoluteness are simply public prayers of confession addressed to the oppressors and the oppressed alike and ultimately to God himself. In theological terms, they have the character of confession and doxology. Anyone who tears them from their historical foundation, generalizes them and uses them to condemn non-Christian religions is thus falsifying their original character.¹³

What we have here seems another case of confusion between personal motivation, on the one hand, and objective claims being made about reality, on the other hand. Motives should never be confused with meaning and truth. Moreover, it must be remarked that upholding — as the Christian tradition seems to require — the "constitutive" uniqueness of Jesus Christ does not necessarily result in "condemning" other religions and their "saving figures." A constant blemish of the pluralist paradigm consists in imagining that the only concretely possible alternative to its own standpoint is a dogmatic, exclusivist dismissal of other religions. Such a black-or-white dilemma is neither biblically nor theologically warranted. For the New Testament affirmation of Christ the man's uniqueness as "the way" (Jn 14:6), the "one mediator" (1 Tim 2:5), the "one name" (Acts 4:12) in whom human beings may find salvation does not cancel out faith in the Logos *asarkos* of which the Johannine Prologue speaks (see Foster 1990, esp. 31; also Parrinder 1990, esp. 51–52), through whom all people may be saved and in whom all ways may converge. He who was "the true light that enlightens every human being by coming into the world" (Jn 1:9) is the same who was to "become flesh" (Jn 1:14) in the "fullness of time" (Gal 4:4) in Jesus Christ.¹⁴ Far from contradicting it, faith in Jesus Christ calls for a commitment and openness to plurality.

13. See Bernhardt 1994, 59–60. The same author sees defensive confessional language, arising out of threatening danger and tending to "absolute" statements, at work in the various situations referred to in Jn 14:6; Acts 4:12; Col 1:15–20. See Bernhardt 1994, 53–59.

14. In his *Readings in St. John's Gospel*, Archbishop William Temple wrote about this verse: "By the Word of God — that is to say by Jesus Christ — Isaiah and Plato, Zoroaster, Buddha and Confucius, uttered and wrote such truths as they declared. There is only one Divine Light, and every man in his own measure is enlightened by it" (quoted in Parrinder 1995, 78–79).

B. Contrasting Claims to Uniqueness

I have shown elsewhere different ways in which neo-Hinduism tends to interpret Jesus Christ. I have distinguished six models of Hindu Christology: the Jesus of the beatitudes; the Christ of bhakti; the Christ of neo-Vedanta philosophy; Christ-*avatara*; Christ the yogi; the Christ of *advaita* mysticism (see Dupuis 1991b, 17–42; see also Thomas 1969; Samartha 1974). Similarly, one could show — leaving Judaism out of consideration here — how the Qur'an and Islam understand Jesus of Nazareth: as a prophet, one greater than Moses yet inferior to Muhammad, who is the "seal of the prophets" (see, among others, Arnaldez 1980, 1988). Again, the Buddhist view or views of Jesus Christ could be dwelt upon: Jesus, the "enlightened" one who, as such, is comparable to the Buddha; and, in later Mahayana developments, Jesus Christ the Bodhisattva (see, e.g., Keenan 1989, 1995; Lefebure 1993; Pieris 1988b; Vallet 1996).

Such is not, however, our intention here. Rather, it is to take note of the claims to uniqueness which other religions make either for their tradition or traditions or for their saving figures. These claims more often than not contrast sharply with those made by Christianity with regard to the person of Jesus Christ. To take cognizance of them is not without bearing on a Christian theology of religions that would claim to be open-ended; for such a theology will have to ask itself how it stands with regard to other claims that at first sight would seem to contradict its own (see Küng et al. 1993; Coward 1985).

R. Bernhardt observes pointedly that the prophetic religions are more prone to make "claims to absoluteness" than are the mystical religions of the East (see Bernhardt 1994, 101–2). Where *Islam* is concerned, he notes that "just as Christians worship Christ as the definitive Word of God made man, so for Muslims the Qur'an is the final word of God revealed through the prophet Muhammad" (Bernhardt 1994, 105). In fact, while for Christians the person of the Word-made-flesh is primarily important and, in relation to him, the word of God revealed through him, the situation in Islam is the reverse: the word of God contained in the Qur'an is what fundamentally matters; and Muhammad is important insofar as he is the channel through whom God's "eternal" word has been conveyed to us.¹⁵ Claims to uniqueness are, therefore, concerned primarily with the Qur'an: "This book is not to be doubted. It is a guide to the righteous" (Surah 2:2); "the only true faith in God's sight is Islam" (Surah 3:19); "he that chooses a religion other than Islam, it will not be accepted from him, and in the world to come he will be one of the lost" (Surah 3:85). According to Islam's self-understanding, however: "This does not amount to an exclusive claim against [Islam's] predecessors, Judaism and Christianity, which denies these re-

15. M. Barnes writes pointedly: "If we restrict ourselves simply to Christianity and Islam, the correct parallel is not between the scriptures of the two traditions, nor between the central founder figures. The Word of God in Islam, the written word, is parallel to another Word, the Logos of John's Gospel. In the Qur'an the Word is made book; in Christianity the Word is made flesh. Jesus is the messenger; Muhammad the messenger of God's word, the mouthpiece through which God's will is made known to humanity" (1991, 52–53).