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not self-evident that the Jesus who disclaimed knowledge of the date of his return in Mark 13:32 was willing to set dates elsewhere. At any rate there is no need to short-circuit the debate by invoking an interpretation of 'kenosis' which was far from Paul's mind when he wrote Philippians 2:7.

This paper has done no more than set out the broad outlines of an evangelical approach to the New Testament evidence for the uniqueness of Christ. As such it demands detailed exegetical support or modification at every point, without which it must appear a bold over-simplification of complex issues. But I believe it has been worth producing, if it enables us to stand back and take stock of the nature of the data on which our exegetical studies must be based, and thus to get our bearings for further study. Without such an exercise, we are in constant danger of becoming so engrossed with the investigation of one particular problem or pericope that we forget the massive cumulative effect of the New Testament evidence taken as a whole. We must never allow our doctrinal debates to make us lose touch with the historical reality experienced in so many different and yet richly complementary ways by the early Christians, which led them, against all the dictates of their culture and upbringing, to the conclusion that in the man Jesus 'the Word became flesh'. For that is what Christianity is all about.

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# Theological Foundations for the Uniqueness of Christ as Hope and Judge

Stephen T. Franklin

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*This paper, presented at the World Evangelical Fellowship Theological Commission consultation on 'The Unique Christ in a Pluralistic World' held in Manila in June, 1992, will be published with other papers in book form.*

*This thought-provoking analysis of the theological foundations for our understanding of and witness to the unique Christ deserves careful reading. The author argues that the uniqueness of Christ does not rest primarily in any doctrine, image or symbol, for they have analogies in other religions and belief systems—for example, the doctrine of incarnation. Nor does the uniqueness of Christ reside in our Christian religious experience, for there too there are are parallels—for example, the experience of salvation by grace alone. Rather, he argues, the uniqueness is found in the 'historical-factual' meaning of events in biblical history—for example, the Exodus and the Resurrection. These are God's actions. Jesus Christ is the unique action of God. He distinguishes this evangelical understanding from the secular view of history as in liberalism and the mythological interpretation of John Hick and company. Further, the author's understanding of our 'existential-universal' experience of the historical-factual enables us to relate the present to the past and to the future. His treatment of the use of analogy, especially when it become idolatrous, brings a wholeness to the discussion. Some reflection on the way God interprets in his acts in history in verbal*

*revelation—for example, the meaning of the Cross, would have been helpful and necessary to the doctrine of the unique Christ.*
Editor

For many Christians, a reference to 'The Unique Christ as the Hope and Judgment of the World' arouses vivid images of the end times: the day of resurrection and the final judgment. As evangelicals, we believe that the final resurrection and the final judgment will be actual events in (a perhaps profoundly altered) time and space. We also believe that the primary actor in these events will be Jesus of Nazareth—not as a p. 30 generalized image nor as a symbol, but as the specific God-man in all his individual personality.

These *future* events, however, do not exhaust the Christian meaning of either hope or judgment. Judgment is also a *present* reality. John 3:18–21 teaches that those who do not believe on Jesus Christ are judged already. What we hope for, must, by definition, be in the future, but the possession of hope can be a present blessing. Peter describes Christian existence as characterized by faith, joy, love, and hope, all of which come from God through Jesus Christ (1 Pet. 1:3–9). In addition, judgment and hope are also linked to past history because they are based on God's previous actions—above all, on the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ outside the city gates of Jerusalem early in the first century.

The Bible teaches that hope and judgment, whether past, present, or future, depend on the unique, specific individual whom we know as Jesus of Nazareth, as Jesus who is the Christ. The unqualified, unapologetic, joyful confession of the uniqueness, supremacy, and centrality of Jesus Christ marks evangelicals. Most of us reject any attempt to limit or reduce the claim that Jesus is the only way to God. For example, we reject the notion that Jesus is supreme *for us* when that is taken to imply that other roads, other saviours, other practices may legitimately be supreme for other people. Another example: while judgment itself belongs in God's hands and not ours, daily life among non-Christians forces us—whether we like it or not and whether we try to avoid it or not—to evaluate the actions, practices, and beliefs of other people. In doing so, evangelicals take Jesus Christ to be the standard by which to make such evaluations. Such an appeal to Jesus Christ may offend not only non-Christians but even other Christians who have internalized the pluralism of our age. But, because Jesus Christ is supreme and unique, we have no other option. And as evangelicals, we steadfastly (but gently, kindly, and politely, I would hope) point all people to Jesus Christ as the universally and supremely valid way, truth, and life.

What I have written thus far is confession: the unique Jesus Christ is the final hope and judge of the world, both of the individual people in the world and of our social, political, economic, and cultural institutions. But in what does this uniqueness[1] rest? It is, after all, an p. 31 empirical fact that most religions—maybe all of them—offer some sort of hope and teach some sort of judgment. Islam is nothing if not adamant about the coming judgment (in which Jesus is said to have a major role!). And Buddhism, in addition to its final liberation, offers innumerable heavens, hells, and judgments and not just the one heaven, one hell, and one judgment heralded by Christianity and Islam. Next Sunday, most people sitting in the pew, even in so-called Christian countries, will have a friend or co-

[1] The organizers of this consultation chose the term 'The Unique Christ'. By this phrase, I understand the special character of Jesus that justifies the biblical claim that Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life, such that no one comes to the Father except through him. Because of his unique (special, foundational, and particular) character, he is the unique (one and only) way to the father. The purpose of this paper is to search for that unique (special and particular) foundation of Christianity that leads us to say that Jesus is the unique (one and only) way to the Father. It should be clear from the context, when I am using 'unique' in the sense of 'one and only' and when I am using it in the sense of 'special, particular, and peculiar.'

worker who accepts one of these alternative, non-Christian views. Our evangelical churches may confess the uniqueness of Jesus Christ as the world's hope and judge, but the everyday life of most members of those churches will challenge that confession. Our historical situation urgently demands that we demonstrate just how and why Christ is unique. We must make this demonstration not only to the larger world but for our own people as well.

## THE UNIQUENESS OF CHRIST DOES NOT RESIDE IN DOCTRINES, IMAGES, OR SYMBOLS

Let me mention several places where the uniqueness of Christ does *not* reside. First, the uniqueness of Christ does not rest primarily in any doctrine, image, or symbol. Any important Christian doctrine or symbol will have analogies in other religions and belief systems.[2]

### Individual Doctrines

Scholars of comparative religions commonly apply the notion of incarnation not just to Jesus but to many other figures and even to inanimate objects in other religions. The Shiite Muslims have their imams who are said to carry in themselves the full divine presence. While one might make the case that this Shiite teaching historically derives from the Christian model, it is harder to argue that the Hindu avatars of Vishnu stem from Christian models. Of course, the Hindu p. 32 avatars are not exact parallels to orthodox Christianity because most Hindu intellectuals would have a docetic understanding of them. That is, it is less significant whether or not there really was a fish swimming in the ocean in whom Vishnu dwelt than that we have the story or image of such a fish. In the case of Krishna, however, it does seem important to some worshippers that such an individual actually existed historically.[3] As a high school boy living in the country of Panama, I made friends with a family who had emigrated from India to Panama. They had a poster, whose meaning at the time I did not grasp but whose incongruity even then was fully apparent. This poster included pictures of the traditional avatars of Vishnu (the boar, the fish, Krishna, etc.), but in addition, the poster had pictures of Jesus and, if I remember correctly, the Virgin Mary. Here Jesus and Mary had been absorbed into a pastiche of Hinduism and Roman Catholicism as incarnations of Vishnu.

The notion of incarnation can be extended—perhaps 'stretched' would be a better word—even farther. Inside certain traditional Japanese Shinto shrines, there is a 'Holy of Holies' holding a special object such as a mirror, or sword, or stone-jewel. This object is

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[2] It would affirm that the ideational content of Christianity *ultimately* is special and particular. But, to jump ahead to my conclusion, the uniqueness of Christianity stems from 'facts' (God's actions in history) and not from 'ideas' (such as doctrines, images, etc.). Given the specificity of the facts, we can move to the special and unique character of Christian doctrine, but we cannot proceed the other way around.

[3] The story of Krishna's dancing with the milk-maids would seem calculated, however, to encourage a docetic interpretation even of Krishna. In the story, a very handsome Krishna has attracted a group of admiring milk-maids, each wanting to dance with him. The story continues by telling us that each girl does dance with Krishna and that this dance creates an overwhelming ecstasy in her. Moreover, the girls were all dancing simultaneously! This is possible because the girls were 'really' dancing with each other. The ecstasy had turned each girl's consciousness away from normal sense perception so that she did not notice her 'real'—that is, her *external*—partner. And yet at a deeper level, each girl really—that is, *internally*, the true reality for which no quotation marks are needed—did dance with Krishna. I think it is fair to say that the story suggests that the Krishna in our souls is the important Krishna and that any external figure must be considered secondary.

called the shintai which can be translated as 'Divine Object'.[4] The Divine Object provides a place for the presence of the Sacred. In a very general sense, one may say that most religious traditions—certain forms of mysticism, gnostic traditions, etc., may be exceptions—apprehend the divine presence through some very concrete object or person. The absence of such a concrete/person may even signal a turn toward philosophy and away from religion. Thus, considered as a theme, incarnation, far from being unique to Christianity, seems to be a universal possession of the religious heritage of mankind. p. 33

## Combinations of Doctrines and Combinations of Images

This same logic could be extended to every other doctrine concerning Jesus Christ and the Christian religion. Creation, fall, sin, atonement, propitiation, resurrection, church, sanctification, the rule of God, and hope and judgment—these all have analogues in other religions. It must be immediately added that no analogy is exactly perfect. But every Christian doctrine has a counterpart in at least one other religion which is remarkably close—close enough to cause considerable uneasiness when our North American students and parishioners encounter them for the first time. And if we accept somewhat weaker analogies, then we will find almost endless parallels in other religions to each Christian doctrine.

It must also be added that the various Christian doctrines fit together to form an overall pattern, a gestalt, and an ethos. While at a rather abstract level, other religions exhibit analogies to the general gestalt of Christian doctrine, at a more concrete level, the gestalt of Christianity gives it a unique 'feel' or 'tone.' At the abstract level, one can make a good case, for example, that all religions have some vision of the ideal state of affairs (their version of creation), some statement of a deviation from that idea state of affairs (their version of the fall), and some statement of how to cope with those deviations (their version of salvation). Yet Christianity—and every other religion as well—fleshes out this abstract pattern in its own unique way. The world view presupposed by Christianity (with its creator God) and that presupposed, for example, by Zen Buddhism (with its stress on ultimate Emptiness) are clearly contradictory.

In addition, there is a middle zone between the meaning of a particular doctrine and the gestalt of the entire religion. In this middle ground, several doctrines in a non-Christian religion may combine in patterns that are hauntingly parallel to Christianity. A good example comes from the True Pure Land Religions of Japan. The Buddhist saint Shinran (1174–1268) despaired of ever working his way to salvation, and came to depend totally on the mercies of Amida. Amida had made a vow to bring all sentient creation into enlightenment even if this took countless eons of reincarnations, each reincarnation bringing greater perfection and merit. Shinran taught that faith in Amida allowed one to appropriate the infinite merits that Amida had built up through these endless reincarnations. Amida only asked that people should trust him to provide this salvation. Shinran clearly understood that if 'faith alone' counts, then his efforts as a monk were meaningless. So he gave up his monk's status, married a former nun, and began preaching his p. 34 message to the common people. The common people, who had neither the financial resources nor the social freedom to pursue the rigours of monastic meditation, could surely place their trust in Amida. Shinran, it should be added, had no desire to create a new Buddhist sect, but opposition from the established Buddhism along with the commitment of his followers resulted in a new Buddhist sect.

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[4] The common meanings of the terms 'shin' and 'tai' are 'god' and 'body'.

The parallel with Luther is astonishing. Certainly Shinran taught a Pauline-like doctrine of salvation by grace through faith. When, however, we expand the parellel between Shinran and Luther/Paul to other doctrines, some profound differences emerge. For example, there is no clear doctrine of creation, and there is no notion of an atonement through a vicarious death that pays the penalty of our sins. And Amida is neither the creator of the universe nor the incarnation of the creator-god. However much, and however appropriately, one may wish to speak of the Christ-figure in Amida-Buddhism, the entire gestalt of ideas differs dramatically between the two religions.

### Conclusion

The conclusion I wish to draw is that doctrines, ideas, symbols, or images do not, by themselves, decisively distinguish the special character of Christ from other figures in world religions. Of course, the total gestalt of ideas concerning Christ is different from the total gestalt of beliefs in other religions (except at a highly generic level). Every other religion, however, can make the same claim for the uniqueness of its own pattern of beliefs. The specialness of Christianity, in short, is not special, if we attend solely to the ideational or symbolic structure of Christianity.

## THE UNIQUENESS OF CHRIST DOES NOT RESIDE IN RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

Let me turn to a second area where the uniqueness of Christianity does not reside. The religious experience of Christians does not decisively distinguish between Christianity (or Christ) and other religions (or other saviours). I do not dispute that experience has a profound role in Christianity. Christians get experientially involved with their religion in many ways, some appropriate and some inappropriate—for example, in revivals, in worship, in sacramentalism, in mysticism, and in commitments to service as clergy, missionaries, and lay leaders. Evangelicals in particular would not dismiss the role of experience. We are known for our emphasis on a 'personal relationship with' or a P. 35 'commitment to' Jesus Christ—which surely has an experiential dimension. It should also be noted that quite beyond the evangelical world, Christians generally have emphasized the role of experience. The name of Schleiermacher comes immediately to mind. For Schleiermacher the primary meaning of a Christian doctrine as well as the norms for its truth were to be found in Christian experience. Many, many theologians have followed in Schleiermacher's footsteps, arguing that the Christian religion has first and foremost to deal with our human experience of the divine, or, to phrase it differently, with the divine dimension in our experience.

Most theologians today, evangelical or not, would affirm the role of experience in Christianity. Nonetheless, the uniqueness of Christ cannot be established on the basis of our Christian experience. To whatever experience we might turn, we can find a similar experience in other religions. For example, other religions can certainly match the intensity of Christian commitment. Consider the depth of conviction that motivates many Muslims to holy battle or the passion that enables certain Hindus to walk on fire. Yoga, meditation, and mysticism (no matter how defined) can produce deep and powerful forms of ecstacy. Love for a god, for the ultimate, for a saviour can be found throughout the world. Nearly every religion has some parallel to glossolalia. The same is true of the experiences of atonement, forgiveness, and reconciliation. To take one example, sacramental experience extends far beyond Christianity. I have observed a ceremony at the Shinto shrine in Izumo in which the priests made offerings of cooked rice and sakè (rice-wine) to the gods of Japan, and then the believers ate the rice and drank the sakè as

gifts in which the gods made themselves available to those believers. And when visiting in India, I noticed that some of the ceremonies of worship ended with meals of divine-human communion.

It is sometimes said that (in non-Christian religions) men reach out to God, whereas God in Christ reaches out to men. It would follow that only Christianity offers the experience of grace, of being found by God. While this may be true as a Christian evaluation of the real nature of other religions, it is not true as a phenomenological or empirical description of the religious experiences to be found in these other religions. Many forms of bhakti in Hinduism as well as the True Pure Land sects in Buddhism claim to experience grace and to taste salvation as a gift.

In summary: our claim that Jesus is the unique judge and hope of the world cannot be rooted merely in Christian experience or in Christian doctrine. p. 36

## HISTORICAL EVENTS AND THE CHRIST

Where then can we find the uniqueness of Christ? To move our discussion towards an answer, I wish to repeat a comment made earlier. Every religion has its own gestalt, its own ethos, and its own feel and tone. It is certainly permissible, therefore, to explore the specificity of any religion. To search for the specificity of a religion is to search for those factors, if any, which drive the religion towards its characteristic dogmas, rituals, theologies, ethical systems, and attitudes.

### The Old Testament Events: Historical and Mythical

It is a well-worn but important observation that biblical religion emerges out of particular historical experiences. In the Old Testament, the Exodus stands as the great event of salvation, which is not to deny God saved Israel from her enemies many other times as well. The Exodus so overwhelms later Hebrew experience that most scholars, even on secular assumptions, hesitate to dismiss its historicity entirely.[5] Gerhard von Rad, hardly an evangelical, goes so far as to argue that the Old Testament's formulation of its doctrine of creation—as a specific, one-time event—emerged out of Israel's profound reflection on those specific historical events in which she experienced salvation from her enemies.[6] The important point to notice is this: when Israel experienced salvation, as in the Exodus, she experienced God's action. The focus is always on what God has done.[7] p. 37

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[5] For example, John Bright in his *A History of Israel* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1959) argues that at least some portion of the people who later identified themselves as Israel experienced an actual escape from Egypt. His arguement, at least in intention, seems to be based on secular standards of historiography.

[6] See his *Old Testament Theology*, vol 1, *The Theology of Israel's Historical Traditions*, trans. D. M. G. Stalker (New York and Evanston, III.: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1962), 136–39.

[7] Modern secular historical-consciousness differs radically, at this point, from the Hebrew sense of history which focussed on God's actions. Consider the Exodus as an example of a biblically important event. Contemporary secular scholarship tends to separate the 'real' Exodus from its 'interpretation' as God's action. The secular sciences of history, sociology, etc., can investiage the Exodus only insofar as it is a factor in human experience with observable causes such as the character of Egyptian slavery, the local geography, the wind, tides, etc. These historical, scientific, and academic perspectives, thus, encourage us to think of the observable (i.e., available for observation by any appropriately situated observer) aspects of the Exodus as the 'real' occurrence and to consider the claim that the Exodus is God's action as a secondary 'interpretation' or a 'religious addendum.' For the Bible, in contrast, the Exodus is both divine action and human experience; but the divine action is the primary factor and the human experience of the Hebrew nation, while obviously necessary, is nonetheless the secondary or derivative factor. (This raises some serious methodological issues concerning the extent to which the modern sciences—and in particular the

Israel had to defend her historical foundations against the mythically oriented religion of her Canaanite neighbours.[8] The great scholar of comparative religions, Mircea Eliade, has taught us that a fundamental function of the myths of most early religions, including Canaanite religion, was to structure the current experience of the worshipper and put him into contact with the sacred.[9]

The myths of Baal were not intended to give historical information about what happened at one particular time, but were intended to put us into the contact with what is true at all times. The mythic 'time' of the stories of Baal is really the sacred dimension of reality that is equally present at all 'historical times.' The same applies to the sense of space in mythic religions. There is no contradiction between a myth which pictures creation as beginning in the centre of my city, making it in the centre of the universe, and another myth in which states that creation began in the centre of your city, making it the centre of the universe. The respective myths function to place the believers in contact with mythic 'space' which is equally present in all spaces, not to provide a factual account of particular occurrences at specific locations.

The early prophets—Elijah is the paradigm, but Samuel, Amos and others may also be mentioned—forced Israel to confront the Canaanite religion. Who is the God of IsraeI—Jahweh or Baal? On what did the existence of Israel depend—the historical Exodus and Covenant or the experience of the omnipresent, omnitemporal, true time and true space offered by the myths and rituals of Baal? Four hundred priests of Baal lost their lives at Mt. Carmel in conflict with Elijah precisely over this issue. The Old Testament records the growing awareness of Israel that her destiny depended on Jahweh alone. p. 38

### Israel's incorporation of the mythic dimension[10] into her religion

Yet Israel could not entirely avoid the mythic dimension of religion. Canaanite myth and ritual apparently focussed on the land, on sexuality and fertility, and on the seasons—on what we would call nature. Israel had to ask herself this question: if Jahweh's role is limited to past historical events (escape from enemies), then can he really be adequate to sustain the continuing existence of Israel? Did not Israel also need saving from droughts, famines, and infertility as well as enemy nations? Israel had to learn that Jahweh can be Israel's true saviour only if he is also the creator and, thus, master of heaven and earth. It is fascinating to observe how many of the stories about Elijah focus on Jahweh's capacity to control rain, famine, lightning, thunder, fertility, food, health, and even life and death, where such concerns were the special province of Baal. In short, Jahweh must be present, not just in history, but in nature as well, shaping our experience of the Holy in nature. That is, there must be a mythic dimension to Hebrew religion as well as a historical dimension.

There is, however, another and perhaps equally important reason why Hebrew religion had to incorporate the mythic dimension into its own religious consciousness. The prophets taught that Israel could expect Jahweh to continue to provide salvation from her enemies *because* God had brought Israel out of Egypt and *because* he had made a

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social sciences—have the resources to deal appropriately with the Biblical record of *God's* actions in history.)

[8] In its mythic orientation, Canaanite religion resembles much of Indian religion, Greek religion, gnostic Christianity, etc.

[9] Of Eliade's many works, a good starting point is *The Sacred and the Profane*, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., A Harvest Book, 1959). Another useful book with which to begin is *Cosmos and History: The Myth of the Eternal Return*, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, Harper Torchbooks, The Bollinger Library, 1959).

**[10]** See footnote # 12 for a discussion of the meaning of 'mythic dimension' when applied to Biblical religion.

Covenant with Israel at Sinai. Somehow, therefore, the Exodus and the Sinaitic Covenant had to be made a part of the living experience of later generations of Hebrews. In short, the Exodus and Sinai stories had to be given a mythic dimension for later generations lest their significance be lost. The Hebrew community did this in various ways. One way was by having later generations periodically renew the Covenant (Dt. 30:15–20, Jos. 24:1–28, 2 Ki. 23:1–3, etc.). Joshua's covenant renewal ceremony at Shechem is particularly fascinating because in the ceremony Joshua has God saying 'I brought *you* out [of Egypt],' 'I brought *you* to the land of the Amorites,' etc. By the time of Joshua's renewal ceremony, however, only Caleb and Joshua himself had been adults at the time of the Exodus. Some of the oldest of Joshua's listeners may have been children, but most had not yet been born when the Exodus occurred. Yet Joshua's speech views all his listeners as if they had been full participants in these historical events. The Exodus and Sinai have become contemporaneous for the p. 39 hearers, and these stories now have the role of structuring the hearers' present existence, and of putting them into contact with God's sacred power. In short, Joshua's speech focusses on the present availability of the Exodus and Sinaitic Covenant for the new generation.

## The historical-factual and existential-universal dimensions of events, stories, and doctrines

I wish to introduce some technical terminology at this point. On the one hand, insofar as they are particular, factual occurrences in history, the Exodus and the Sinaitic Covenant have a 'historical-factual' meaning. And, thus, stories that refer to them as real events may also be said to have a 'historical-factual' significance.[11] On the other hand, insofar as they are present realities in the lives of later generations of Hebrews, the Exodus and the Sinaitic Covenant have a 'existentialuniversal' meaning.[12] And. of course, stories about the

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[11] Because of the tendency mentioned in footnote # 7—that is, the tendency of the modern social sciences, including historiography, to restrict the terms 'factual' and 'historical' to what is available to secular observation—I wish to emphasize as strongly as possible that I am using the term 'historical-factual' to refer to *God's* action. Without doubt, God's action in the Exodus was experienced by the original human participants. I am not, however, restricting the term 'historical-factual' to what the contemporary discipline of history or the modern social sciences can ascertain about the Exodus or Mt. Sinai.

It may help to clarify this issue by reference to the 'historical Jesus.' There are three possible meanings to this term: [a] the Jesus who is God's action in space and time, who is proclaimed in scripture, confessed in the creeds, and believed by the faithful; [b] the Jesus insofar as the modern disciplines of history, sociology, etc., can recover information about him; and [c] the actual Jesus who really existed. It is the conviction of evangelicals that [a] and [c] are identical—that is, that the Jesus who is God's action in space and time *is* the Jesus who truly and actually existed. At best, the historical Jesus as recovered by the modern social sciences—option [b]—is part of the real event, of what actually happened; and at worst, the historical Jesus of the modern historians is a fabrication that has nothing to do with what actually happened and may even falsify what actually happened. When I say that the deep structure of Christianity—what gives it its characteristic shape, doctrine, rituals, ethical stance, etc.—enters of God's actions in history, and especially on Jesus Christ, I have in mind the combination of [a] and [c].

[12] All existential-universal language shapes the experience of the contemporary person and brings that person into contact with the Divine or the Holy. There is, however, more than one kind of existential-universal language. In the case of full-blown, genuine myth, a story is told. This story may or may not have actually happened. But even if that story is historically accurate, its connection with history is logically independent of its 'truth' and of its, capacity to structure our experience and to place us in contact with the Holy. In the case of Hebrew religion, in contrast, the function of existential-universal language is precisely to elicit God's past savings acts into present significance and even into a kind of present reality. Thus the existential-universal language of the Hebrews contains a necessary link to historical actuality and differs profoundly from the existential-universal language of myth. When comparing Israelite with Canaanite religion, or Christianity with Indian religion, we must remember both the similarities and the differences of

Exodus and the p. 40 Sinaitic Covenant may be used to structure the experience of later generations and to put these later generations into contact with the sacred power of Jahweh; such stories may then be said to have an 'existential-universal' dimension of meaning.

The terminology of 'historical-factual' and 'existential-universal' can be expanded to include all the major doctrines of Christianity. Thus the historical-factual resurrection is nothing less than God's act of raising Jesus from the dead, outside the city gates of Jerusalem approximately 1,960 years ago. Yet the resurrection must also be made present to the later generations of Christian believers. In the words of an American spiritual, 'Were *you* there when God raised (Jesus) from the tomb?' The resurrection, through the power of the Holy Spirit, shapes our current experience of salvation, of self-understanding, and of access to God's presence. Similar analyses could be made of doctrines such as incarnation, atonement, Pentecost, crucifixion, and even creation and judgment.

My basic thesis is that the specific character of Biblical religion and, thus, of Christianity stems from the priority given to the historical-factual dimension of the Bible's basic teachings and doctrines. The basic content of the doctrine of the Exodus, for example, is God's action of saving Israel out of Egypt. And if we want to know the fundamental meaning of the incarnation, we must appeal to God's act in which he took on flesh in Jesus Christ. Both of these are particular events, located in the temporal sequence of history. In addition, the Exodus and incarnation also have an existential-universal dimension. The Exodus *is* a part of the contemporary, living experience of every later generation of Hebrews. And the incarnation *is*, in various ways, a present reality to every later generation of Christians as, for example, they experience Christ through the physical bread and wine of the Lord's Supper, as they express practical compassion for physical suffering, and as they take joy in the physical aspects of their marriages. Nevertheless, neither sacraments nor ethical action nor Christian marriage carries any normative weight in itself; the actual historical and factual incarnation that began in Mary's womb provides the basic p. 41 meaning of the incarnation and serves as the norm for all the other experiential and universal meanings of incarnation. In short, because Biblical religion is rooted in specific historical events, and because the religious experiences of later generations are normatively grounded in the specificity of these events, it follows that a biblically based religion will emphasize its unique and particular characteristics and will resist the universalization of this historical specificity into mythic patterns whose truth-value is determined by the experience of the contemporary believer.

## The Historical-Factual Priority of Jesus Christ

The New Testament presents Jesus Christ as God's action. That is, the Christ-event is something that God did. In the Old Testament, God acts in, and as the cause of, certain events, such as rescuing Israel out of Egypt and of constantly refilling the jar of flour and jug of oil for the widow of Zarephath during the drought (1 Ki. 17:7–16). In the New Testament, those sorts of divine actions continue to occur. But, in addition, there is a new form of divine action—the life and teachings of a particular man, Jesus of Nazareth, are proclaimed to be the very action of God. ('God proves his love for us in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us,' Rom. 5:8, and 'Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father,' Jn. 14:9b.)

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the different form of existential-universal language. The existential-universal language of the Hebrews is sufficiently like that of the religions oriented to myth that it is proper to speak of a mythic dimension to the Hebrew religion. At the same time, we must also keep in mind the profound difference between the Hebrew existential-universal language that is logically tied to history and the existential-universal language of myth that has no essential connection to history.

The Christian emphasis on the specific individual Jesus Christ and, thus, on his uniqueness, has several roots. First, insofar as God has acted in Jesus Christ, we have another case of God's action at a particular time and place in history. Therefore, in doctrines connected with Jesus Christ (incarnation, resurrection, atonement, etc.), the primary emphasis will be on the historical-factual foundation of those doctrines—that is, on Jesus Christ himself. Of course, somehow, the events in the life of Jesus must be made available for the experience of later Christians; that is, they must have an existential-universal function as well. Nonetheless, as part of the heritage of Hebrew religion, priority must be granted to the historical-factual event of Jesus Christ. The historical and factual Jesus of Nazareth, who is God's action, must be the norm by which we give content to all our Christological doctrines and by which we evaluate the appropriateness of our existential-universal appropriations of these doctrines.

Second, some weight must be given to the fact that in the New Testament, God's supreme action did not merely take place *through* a prophet or other person, but that God's supreme action *was* (and *is*) nothing less than a *person*. Particular, historical persons who actually p. 42 lived have a specificity and power which is possessed by no other kind of event or object. They have, to use Martin Buber's classic phrase, an unrepeatable identity as a particular 'thou' that cannot be reduced to a fully describable and analysable 'it.'

Even the Exodus, while it certainly was a particular and specific event, was also an example of a class of events—namely, escapes from slavery or divine rescues. Fictional characters can often leave an impression of great specificity and uniqueness, but that is a by-product of the much greater specificity and unrepeatability of genuine, individual human begins. Of course, people can be put into various classifications of age, rank, sex, nationality, personality, occupation, residence, etc. But these categories, whether considered one-by-one or as an entire group, somehow miss the essence of the actual, individual, human being as he exists in time and space. To the extent, therefore, that Christianity rests on God's action in a *person*—and not just in a dramatic rescue out of slavery or even in raining fire down from heaven to consume Elijah's sacrifice on Mt. Carmel—we have an additional basis for expecting Christianity to focus on the specific, unique, unrepeatable Jesus of Nazareth who is God's own action.

The Bible provides a number of other avenues for approaching the figure of Jesus. We could, for example, trace the implications of the various titles and roles for Jesus Christ—Messiah Son of Man, Saviour, Lord, eschatological prophet, etc. And we could trace the New Testament's application to Jesus of various Old Testament passages which, in their original context, referred to Jahweh. In each case, we find that the New Testament roots its message in the historical-factual figure of Jesus Christ in all his specificity, idiosyncrasy, particularity, and individuality.

It may be worth noting that the later Christological and Trinitarian controversies are both a natural and a necessary continuation of the biblical emphasis on the historical Jesus of Nazareth. Modern advocates of pluralism—such as John Hick—are quite correct to attack both the notion of God-Incarnate and the related doctrine of the Trinity if they wish to undermine the notion of Christian uniqueness or normativity.[13] Hick and company have reversed the priority of the historical-factual over the existential-universal; they have reversed the p. 43 priority of God's specific action at a particular time and place over God's mythic presence at every time and place.

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[13] See John Hick, ed., *The Myth of God Incarnate* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1977). 'The Non-Absoluteness of Christianity,' in *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness*, ed. John Hick and Paul Knitter (New York: Orbis Press, 1987). And *An Interpretation of Religion* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1989).

Let's look briefly at some of the implications of calling the incarnation a myth, as Hick would suggest. It implies [a] the devaluation of the actual occurrence in Mary's womb as normative. God's presence in Mary's womb is 'just a myth' in the negative sense of myth—as a story about something that did not actually happen in real history. But, more positively, to call the incarnation a myth also implies [b] that it is a story which can be used to interpret and structure Christian experience. It can open up to our experience that sacred place, which being at no particular place is at every place, and that sacred time, which being at no particular time is at every time. Lastly, to call the incarnation a myth is [c] to recognize the possibility that other myths might also provide an access, a window to the divine. Other myths might connect the believer with the same aspects of the Sacred Mystery or with other aspects of the Sacred Mystery. In either case, since myths do not make any normative appeals to the history of God's actions, they do not necessarily conflict with each other. In short, to call the incarnation a myth is to imply that there is no place for Christian triumphalism nor for any claim that Jesus Christ is the norm by which to test all other claims to religious or ethical knowledge.

It is no accident, therefore, that evangelicals have maintained their commitment to a high Christology and to the doctrine of the Trinity. Both doctrines refer us back to the historical-factual ground of our Christian religion, to God's act in Jesus of Nazareth. We would affirm, of course, that Christological and other Christian doctrines *also* have existential-universal meanings; but these existential-universal meanings are secondary and under the norm of God's action in the specific, historical Jesus Christ. This return to the historical-factual foundations of our faith is a characteristic mark of Biblical religion and provides the underlying explanation for the specific and idiosyncratic form of Christian doctrines, rituals, theologies, ethical systems, and attitudes. This priority of the historical-factual Christ-event over its existential-universal dimensions may be called the 'Christian *a-priori*?[14]

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[14] Many theologians—including Schleiermacher, Ritschl, Troeltsch, Bultmann, Tillich, and Meland—who have placed a high emphasis on the existential-universal dimensions of Christian doctrine—have also wished to affirm the origin of Christianity in a particular event. The tendency, however, of such thinkers is to emphasize Christian origins as available to the social sciences, that is, as a part of human experience and insofar as they are available to secular modes of understanding human experience. They downplay the notion of a knowable act of God as the norm of our theological commitments.

I appreciate the contributions of each of these theologians and they are indeed sensitive to many of the themes that I have stressed. Nevertheless, I would argue that their analyses of 'history' actually focus more on the existential-universal side of Christian doctrine than on what I have called the historical-factual.

For example, Schleiermacher often rejoices in the presence of God in Christ—which sounds like what I have been stressing. But the presence of God in Christ, for Schleiermacher, seems basically to mean Jesus' possession of a 'God-consciousness' insofar as historical science can recover the human experience of God-consciousness. Since Schleiermacher has begun with human exerience, we will not be surprised to hear that the God-consciousness in Jesus is the perfect development of a capacity that is potentially available to all human beings. The issue at stake is this: Schleiermacher's fundamental theological interpretation of the presence of God in Jesus emerged *out of* his analysis of the *religious experience* of Jesus and of Christians generally. Evangelicals *begin* by accepting the Bible's proclamation that *God* has acted decisively in Jesus Christ.

Of course, the divine action in Christ has impacted human experience in many ways. This impact means that the Christ event *is*, in part, intertwined with every other event in history, and, thus, modern historiography and the social sciences may undertake a legitimate but *partial* and *secondary* investigation of the Christ event. Indeed, because of this interweaving of God's action in Jesus into human experience, it is possible for Christian doctrine to possess an existential-universal side. Unlike Karl Barth, therefore, I would *accept* the analyses of Schleiermacher and company as profound investigations of the existential-universal dimension of Christian doctrine—which dimension, although secondary, is an important and necessary aspect of our Christian teaching and preaching. I would also *reject* these same analyses when understood as giving us the *basic* meaning of Christian doctrine (as Schleiermacher intended).

## THE CHRISTIAN A-PRIORI

In the previous section we sought those factors that drive Christianity towards its distinctive forms. We found that underlying biblical religion P. 44 is a commitment to the radical priority of the historical-factual character of God's actions over the existential-universal appropriation of those actions by later generations. This we called the Christian *a-priori*.

There is nothing in principle, however, to prevent other religions from searching for their own *a-priori*—for searching for those factors which give the religion its characteristic doctrines, rituals, etc. As each religion finds its own *a-priori*, its own deep structure, we should expect to find both differences and similarities with Christianity, probably more differences than similarities. The significance of those differences/similarities for a particular religion will be determined by character of that religion's *a-priori*.[15] p. 45

If we know the *a-priori* that gives a religion its gestalt and ethos, we can make some educated guesses about its likely response to the existence of other religions. Many religions, both in practice and in theory, give priority to the existential-universal dimension. This would be true of those religions with an orientation to the mythic (in Eliade's sense). A mythically oriented religion would, most likely, try to find some way of accommodating Christianity. A mythic religion can be quite accepting of other religions—at least as 'lesser' or preliminary religious paths. For example, Buddhism, which is

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[15] It is not a part of this paper to engage in apologetics. However, this would be the location, in terms of the paper's structure, to present a defence of the truth of Christianity. If my argument thus far is correct, then it should be possible to give good reasons which add up to a 'cumulative case argument' for Christianity. This may not be an incontrovertible 'proof' for Christianity, but it would indicate that Christianity is at least as reasonable an option as ally other (including agnosticism) and perhaps the most reasonable option.

In outline, my case would run like this: I would presuppose that religious language can have meaning and that God or a Sacred Power of some sort exists. If these two factors are not granted then we would have to deal with those issues first. In the case of a discussion of religious pluralism, however, I would think that we could assume that religious language has meaning and that God or the Sacred is real. Assuming that there is no argument about those two claims, then the rest of my argument would run as follows.

[a] When one considers a religion, one enters into it and accepts, at least provisionally, its basic orientation. In the case of Christianity, this would be a provisional acceptance of the Christian *a-priori*, of the Christian commitment to God's acts in history, [b] If these events really did occur, then they would have had an impact on human experience. [c] Thus if there were good evidence that no such impact occurred, we would have to reject the Christian claims. For example, if the Jewish leaders or Roman authorities had produced the body of Jesus, sometime after his alleged resurrection, then Christianity, at least in its classical, orthodox form, would be false. It is important to note that apparently no one ever produced the corpse, and later anti-Christian polemic does not claim that the corpse was produced. [d] I would further expect the social sciences to be able to confirm that *some* aspects of these events did occur—specifically, those aspects which are a part of human experience and publicly observable. I would expect, for example, the balance of historical evidence to show that it is probable that there was man named Jesus and that his disciples truly thought that they had seen him after his death. [e] The Christian faith, based on the acceptance of the Bible's presentation of God's acts, claims to make those acts available to me now, as a part of my current experience—for example, in the Lord's Supper, or in a personal encounter with Christ, or in having a purpose for living, or in experiencing the forgiveness of sins. Since (1) there is no good evidence that these events did not occur; since (2) the original historical-factual events, if they did occur, had an impact on human experience, and since (3) there is good historical evidence for that impact, we may conclude that it is likely that our existential-universal experience of those events is veridical. [f] Given these foundations, the coherence of Christian doctrines, and the ability of the Christian faith to provide a coherent world-view becomes highly relevant evidence. [g] Analogies to Christian doctrine throughout other religions and in a wide variety of cultures becomes additional confirming evidence. Taken together, we have good reasons by which to justify a commitment to the Christian faith. Nonetheless, we must remember that it is the Holy Spirit who truly unites to Jesus unto salvation, and not logic nor historical evidence.

strongly oriented to p. 46 the existential-universal side of religion, actually needs other religions to co-exist with it. The myths, rituals, and meditational techniques of Buddhism are intended to provide insight into one's own ultimate identity. But for the full round of human existence—birth, marriage, fertility, etc.—Buddhism has little to offer and has no objection to the simultaneous practice of other religions.[16] It must also be stated that most of the advanced mythic religions—Buddhism, Hinduism, gnosticism, etc.—perceive themselves as quite tolerant, although most of them also perceive themselves as the final or highest stage of religious truth. Such religions will certainly view Christianity as intolerant with its stress on particular divine actions—above all, the incarnation in Jesus Christ—as the norm for all religious claims. Advocates of such religions are likely to feel more comfortable with a mythic reinterpretation of Christianity in which the Christ-motif takes priority over the historical Jesus. Such a mythic Christ, then, would become just one more way of encountering the divine.

In theory, it is certainly possible for another, non-Christian religion to give priority to the historical-factual dimension, just as Christianity does. In that case, there would be an professed set of special events on which the religion would be based, where these events were divine actions or otherwise revealed the Sacred Power of the universe. This would create a very sharp conflict with Christianity. In principle, however, it would be impossible for both set of events to have occurred as reported by the respective religions. Thus, historical investigation of the professed events would be quite relevant in deciding between the two religions.[17] In fact, it might even happen that historical investigations could actually settle the disagreement between such a religion and Christianity, because proof of the non-occurrence p. 47 of one of the central 'events' on which the religion was founded would decisively count against the truth of that religion. Any religion founded on historical-factual events runs a risk—namely, that the events did not occur or that they occurred in significantly different ways than reported by that religion. Finally it should be observed that such attention to historical facts simply is not relevant when interacting with religions that give priority to the existential-universal dimension.[18]

## An Extension of the Existential-Universal Dimension of Christian Doctrine

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[16] Those forms of Buddhism stemming from Nichiren (1222–82) preach that, at least in Japan, Buddhism should be the only religion. So far as I am aware, however, Nichiren's Buddhism seems to be the only significant exception to the general Buddhist practice of friendly co-existence and division of labour with other religions.

Anyone who has lived in a Buddhist culture quickly becomes aware of Buddhism's mixing with other religions. For a sociological analysis of this phenomenon in a Theravadan setting, including certain limits to multiple religious participation, see S. J. Tambiah, *Buddhism and the Spirit Cults of North-east Thailand* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970).

[17] As an illustration of the relevance of historical investigation to a certain type of religious dispute, consider that the Koran teaches that Jesus did not die on the cross, while the Bible teaches that he did. Historical evidence for the crucifixion of Christ, therefore, counts in favor of Christianity and against Islam, whereas any evidence that Jesus was not executed would tend in the opposite direction. Fortunately for Christianity, the evidence that Jesus was executed is quite compelling.

[18] For example, Buddhists have invested considerable labour trying to uncover 'the historical Buddha.' And some Buddhists, when they 'take refuge in the Buddha,' have in mind the historical Siddhartha who lived in India. Nevertheless, supposed that it could be shown that the Buddha never existed or that his actual teachings were quite different from those we now know under his name, this would not undercut the foundations of Buddhism since the image of the Buddha is what counts more than the details of history. One of the most radical traditions of Buddhism states that 'if you meet the Buddha, kill him!'

The Christian faith begins with God's historical-factual acts, supremely Jesus Christ. It makes those past actions available in the present, which is the existential-universal dimension of Christianity. Stories, creeds, rituals, etc., can be used either historically-factually or existentially-universally, that is, to point to the original actions or to open up their present significance and presence.

The Bible, it should be noted, contains literature that does not directly fit into the scheme of historical-factual and existential-universal meanings as it has been developed thus far. The wisdom literature, for example, does not normally refer to God's saving acts in history, nor does it apply those acts to the present, nor does it tell stories (as myths do). The Book of Proverbs, for example, provides guidance for daily living and Job and Ecclesiastes challenge the standard wisdom of the people of Israel. This guidance is intended to enable one to live well before Jahweh, in short to connect us with Jaweh in our everyday life. In that sense, the wisdom literature may be said to have an 'extended' existential-universal meaning.[19] I would argue, however, that even the wisdom literature functions only within the context of a primary p. 48 Hebrew commitment to God's historical-factual actions as the foundation of Israel's existence.

It is possible to expand the existential-universal dimension of Christianity to an even broader horizon. Scholars of, for example, literary analysis often find Christian categories, such as sin, redemptive suffering, atonement, etc., useful tools for analysing fiction, even fiction from non-Christian cultures. Anthropologists have found parallels to Christian categories in many cultures. We have already mentioned that each doctrine of Christianity has a close analogue in one or more non-Christian religions. And an entire discipline, the theology of culture, has used Christian categories to understand cultural phenomena.

I believe that these uses of Christian categories simply extend their existential-universal meaning. To be sure, such highly extended applications of the existential-universal meaning of Christian doctrines no longer function to put the hearer into direct contact with the historical-factual acts of God that originally gave these doctrines their normative meaning within Christianity. But neither can the applicability of Christian categories outside the Christian religion be dismissed as accidental coincidence.

There are a number of places in which we might look to explain the applicability of Christian doctrines outside of Christianity. The doctrine of creation tells us that God is the maker of heaven and earth. If God is personal, as evangelicals surely believe, then we would expect his creation to exhibit characteristic traces of his individual character. Since God's character is supremely, normatively, and foundationally revealed in his historical-factual acts culminating in Jesus Christ, we should expect to find parallels or analogies between God's specific actions (which ground Christian doctrine) and his acts in creation. Another place we might look is the doctrine of the Logos, especially in the light of the claim that it was the Logos who became flesh in Jesus Christ. One might also point to general revelation or to the doctrine of common grace. If all human beings have an innate—albeit perhaps subconscious—awareness of God, then the character of the true God should have some impact upon all human religion, culture, and consciousness. Sin might distort this impact, but we should not expect it to be missing.

### The Doctrine of Analogy and Christ as Hope and Judge of the World

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[19] There are some religions that do not seem to centre on divine actions, nor on the application of those divine actions to the present, nor on mythic stories. For example, Confucianism, at least in some of its early variations centres on wisdom and the ideal of the sage. Confucianism, thus, stresses the existential-universal side of religion, but this seems to be a different type of the existential-universal from that found either in Christianity or in the mythic religions.

Assuming that our argument has thus far been correct, it seems plausible to expect that certain analogies should hold between p. 49 Christianity and other religions, other ideologies, other world views, and other value systems. I would like to use the analysis of analogy and metaphor offered by Ian Barbour.[20] According to Barbour, when I say that 'Jane is a tiger,' there are three different aspects to this metaphor. First, there is the positive analogy—areas in which Jane is quite explicitly like a tiger. For example, Jane is assertive and strong. Second, there is the negative analogy—areas in which Jane is quite obviously not like a tiger. For example, Jane does not have a furry tail or large fangs. And third, there is the open area—areas in which it is neither explicitly affirmed nor denied that Jane is like a tiger. This is the area for exploration, development, and creativity. Perhaps Jane is somewhat dangerous, or cunning, or has the capacity to move silently and gracefully, appearing where we do not expect her. Every powerful analogy has a large open space.

My suggestion is that the use of analogy and metaphor has an essential role in the development of Christian doctrine. The bedrock of Christian doctrine is, of course, the actual divine events in history, as recorded in Scripture. From that bedrock, we enrich our doctrines through a series of analogies. First, there is the analogy between the historical-factual event (such as Christ's incarnation as reported in scipture) and its existential-universal appropriation in the Lord's Supper, in our attitudes towards our bodies, etc. The foundation is the historical-factual incarnation in Mary. Insofar as later Christian experience is explicitly like that incarnation, it must be accepted. For example, we must be open to God's presence in concrete persons, such as one's neighbour or one's pastor. Insofar as later Christian experience is explicitly unlike the historical incarnation, that later experience must be rejected. For example, Christians are not physically born of virgins without a human father,[21] nor has the Logos assumed the flesh of anyone but Jesus. In addition, however, there is a broad open area in which we may explore the analogy between the historical-factual incarnation and our existential-universal application of it. As the church explores this open area, we gradually gain a richer and more nuanced understanding of the doctrine of the incarnation. Roman Catholics and Protestants alike agree that the extension of the incarnation to include icons (in the technical sense) is inappropriate; p. 50 and Protestants would also hold that the use of the incarnation to justify the doctrine of transubstantiation is also inappropriate. This much we have learned from history. On the other hand, it does seem appropriate to appeal to the incarnation to justify Christian art and concern for human social welfare.

The second analogy holds between Christian events, doctrines, stories, etc. and their existential-universal echoes that we find throughout the world. Thus, to the extent that there is a 'positive analogy' between the presence of the Divine Object in a Shinto shrine and the Christian doctrine of incarnation, it should be affirmed. At the very least, the Christian is obligated to accept the focus on the concrete as the locus of the divine presence. To the extent that there is negative analogy, however, that aspect of Shinto must be denied. God's presence in Jesus Christ is, for example, infinitely richer than in a mere rock or sword; and Christians should certainly reject the Shinto tendency to perceive, not the God who created that rock, but local powers who have chosen to inhabit that rock. And to the extent that the Divine Objects in Shinto shrines serve to legitimate the divinity

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[20] *Myths, Models, and Pardigms: A Comparative Study in Science and Religion* (New York: Harper & Row, Pub., 1974), 44.

[21] It is traditional, however, to see an analogy between Christ's Virgin Birth and our spiritual rebirth. According to John 1:12–13, people who believe in Jesus 'because children of God—children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God.'

of the Japanese emperors and the sacred character of the emperor system, there is another negative analogy that must be vigorously rejected. Lastly, however, there is the open area, neither affirmed nor denied in the analogy between the Christian incarnation and the Shinto Divine Object. Here is the area for exploration.

God's actions in history, recorded in Scripture and culminating in Jesus Christ, constitute the cornerstone in this series of analogies. Direct agreement implies acceptance by Christians. Here Christ functions as a positive norm. Direct disagreement implies rejection by Christians. Here Christ functions as a negative norm.[22] In the third case, the open area, Christ functions as an invitation for and guide to inquiry. This last area implies that Christianity can be enriched as it meets new cultures, new historical eras, and even other religions. This enrichment requires judgment and wisdom because there are no mechanical decision procedures guaranteeing a correct and proper evaluation of the open areas. It also takes time, even generations, to come to a decision. Each theologian and cross-cultural expert will have his own preferred areas and skills for exploration. I am personally p. 51 interested in the Buddhist theme of Emptiness as a way of enriching our understanding of the kenosis (Phil. 2:5–6) and of the Cross.

It is important that we acknowledge the existential-universal application of Christian themes beyond the borders of Christianity for two additional reasons. First, it makes missions and evangelism possible. We sometimes talk of pre-evangelism or that preunderstanding necessary before the gospel can be a real option. In the deepest sense, God himself has done that pre-evangelism. By providing echoes of Christian themes in every culture and in every religion, he has given the entire human race some 'handles' that allow them at least a preliminary understanding of the gospel when it is preached.[23] Without these 'handles'—these echoes, these existentialuniversal applications of Christian themes—the Gospels would come as something totally incomprehensible to the non-Christian and, therefore, never as a true option.[24] One of the most extraordinary outcomes of the Christian missionary movement is the demonstration in actual practice that the gospel can be understood, at least to some extent, by members of every known culture, era, and religion. Second, the existence of these existential-universal themes throughout all cultures and religions is important evidence for the truth of Christianity. We hold that the same God whom we meet as Saviour in Jesus Christ is also the Creator.

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[22] At times the negative analogy can consist of mere mistakes and errors. At other times, the negative analogy seems to stem from sin. Negative analogy in the area of incarnation (God's presence in the concrete) is particularly open to idolatry. As we observe sin and idolatry in the negative analogical content of other religions and worldviews, however, we must not overlook our own sinful tendency to misappropriate and to misuse Christian doctrines, rituals, and symbols.

[23] In his book, *Peace Child* (Glendale, California: G/L Regal Books, 1974), Don Richardson has written a fascinating account of a custom among certain non-Christian tribes that profoundly echoed the Christian doctrine of the atonement. As an evangelical missionary, Richard used that custom as a point of contact between those tribes and the gospel. I would consider this custom to be an existential-universal echo of the historical atonement on the cross—an echo that made available to those tribes the preunderstanding which they needed to hear the gospel as a live option, but also an echo deeply distorted by sin.

[24] Langdon Gilkey has shown in his *Naming the Whirlwind: The Renewal of God-Language* (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1969) that the death of God movement of two decades ago arose, in part, out of Karl Barth's theology. By denying any point of contact—to use Emil Brunner's phrase—Barth effectively divorced Christianity from the general life of mankind. The gospel came as a 'bolt from the blue' and, therefore, as something inherently incomprehensible and isolated. As the Death of God theologians clearly and correctly saw, an incomprehensible and isolated 'God' is a dead god indeed. My argument is that the existential-universal echoes of the Christian faith to be found throughout the world function as that context that allows the gospel to be understood and appropriated as it moves into new situations or even into new generations.

Since we also hold that the Exodus, the Christ event, etc., as recorded in scripture most fundamentally reveal the nature of that Creator-Saviour God, we should expect to find analogies to those divine actions distributed throughout all the world. Of course, because p. 52 of sin, we should also expect those analogies to have limitations (negative analogical content). But a complete lack of existential-universal echoes throughout all history and all cultures would be convincing evidence that Christians have erred in identifying the Saviour God with the Creator God—if, indeed, there should be any 'god' at all.

### Beyond Analogy: the Future Judgment and Hope as History

The Christian *a-priori* rests in the historical-factual acts of God in which he saves his people—supremely his act in Jesus Christ. The Bible extends this emphasis on specific actions both backward to creation and forward to the eschaton. Of course, creation and the eschaton also have profound existential-universal applications to our current experience, both to specifically Christian experience and to generically human experience. But these existential-universal dimensions do not exhaust the meanings of either creation or the eschaton. Creation is an event at the beginning of time. And the judgment and perfect reign of God will come at the end of history. Because our language is constructed to deal with vents and objects within history, within the stream of time, we should be quite humble when dealing with events at the beginning or end of history as we have known it. Nevertheless, the fundamental structure of Christian belief that God reveals himself primarily through his historical-factual deeds—leads to the expectation that both the beginning and the end are genuine events. And indeed, this is precisely what the Bible teaches.[25]

Christians believe that the historical-factual Jesus is God's act. Jesus is not just an existential-universal image. Jesus is also unique, even among God's actions, for he alone is truly a person. As a person, he is a 'thou' with all the individuality and personality that only true, actually existent persons possess. This individuality and personality reveal the character of God, who is also personal, also a thou. Because of the deep sense of individuality that the Bible attaches to a person, to a p. 53 'thou', only one human 'thou' could manifest the *full* presence of the divine 'thous'.[26] If the unique person Jesus truly reveals the person-hood of God, then we should find the Bible connecting Jesus of Nazareth with all of God's other actions. And indeed this is exactly what we do find.

God's act of creation is attributed to the pre-incarnate Christ—that is, to the logos (Jn. 1:1–5). Because of the Bible's deep sense of temporality, there is no hint in scripture that the humanity of Jesus was involved in that act of creation, only the logos. However, once the incarnation has occurred, then the actions of the logos never take place apart from the historical-factual Jesus. Having taken on flesh in Jesus Christ, God never shuffles off that

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[25] To claim that the exchaton will be an actual event (or series of events) does not imply that every biblical description of these events must be taken literally. We can use symbol, code, and metaphor to describe actual events. The language, for example, describing the New Jerusalem as 'made of pure gold, as pure as glass' (Rev. 21:18) seems to me to be metaphor and should be taken as such. Many of our problems in interpreting scripture, when dealing with the creation and the eschaton, stem from our failure to realize that an event can be described symbolically without thereby compromising that event's character as something that actually happens (or did happen or will happen).

[26] At this point, we have another approach for understanding the Trinity. The full presence of God in Christ is the Word. The full presence of God here and now is the Holy Spirit. More specifically, only the Holy Spirit can unite me, here and now, with the historical-factual Christ. It is the work of the Holy Spirit that creates a distinction between those existential-universal applications of God's actions that provide salvation (above all, creating a union between the believer and the historical-factual Jesus) and those existential-universal myths, themes, and images that do not convey salvation.

flesh. Even now God is the incarnate God. Thus the final judgment is both God's act and at the same time, Christ's act. The deep-level structure of the Christian faith implies that the incarnate Christ is indeed the judge of the world. In addition, the final kingdom, the final eschaton, the final harmony has Jesus at its very centre. Paul says, in Ephesians 1:9–10, that the historical Christ unfolds the divine mystery that all things will someday be united under one head, even Christ. And Revelation 22:1 says that at the centre of the New Jerusalem will be a single throne, which is 'the throne of God and of the Lamb'.

The Christian *a-priori*, the deep structure of the Christian faith, declares the unique Christ to be both the hope and the judge of the world.

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# Jesus in African Culture

Kwame Bediako

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*To an evangelical Christian steeped in classical western systematic theology and missionary practice (and this includes many 'third world' Church and missionary leaders) this article may raise many difficulties. Its importance lies in the fact that the author, a Ghanian of the Akan clan, is an evangelical theologian struggling with his identity as an African and as a Christian and how he relates the gospel to the traditional beliefs and values of his people. He explores two areas: Jesus 'our Saviour' who reigns over the spiritual realm including evil spirits and is mediated to us by the Holy Spirit and secondly, the relation of Jesus Christ to God the Supreme Spirit Being (Onyame), creator and sustainer of the universe and to the ancestors or 'spirit fathers'—the living dead of the clan. He argues that the more rapid spread of Christianity among societies with primal religious systems than among other societies occurs because Africans find in Jesus Christ the reality and spiritual experience that meets the needs and fears of their traditional religious beliefs and practices. He criticizes the early missionaries for creating an unnecessary dichotomy in the converts' religious experience. However, the author is careful to show that the gospel judges those elements of primal faith that are contrary to biblical revelation (for example, witchcraft and the occult), replaces others and points to the 'new story' of the incarnation, crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ. He shows the importance of the Epistle to the Hebrews as a bridge to the knowledge of salvation in Christ.*
Editor

## CHRISTIAN FAITH AND AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION IN RETROSPECT

One of the most telling commentaries on the presentation of the gospel of Jesus Christ in Africa is the following statement: