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What Exactly is Meant by the 'Uniqueness of Christ'?

An Examination of the Phrase and Other Suggested Alternatives in the Context of Religious Pluralism (Part I)

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Introduction: Is there an issue here?

(a) Is uniqueness the best available word to use when describing Christ?

The heart of Christian faith is the good news about Jesus Christ. The gospel is plainly christocentric in character, and evangelical assertions about Christ—especially in the context of religious pluralism—have frequently, confidently, and even casually used the noun 'uniqueness' or the adjective 'unique'. But a number of observers complain about what one of them calls 'the abundant sloppiness in the use of the term [uniqueness], especially in theological writing'.[1] The question might therefore be asked: Is 'uniqueness' the best available word to use when describing Christ? There are no close Hebrew or Greek equivalents for the English words 'uniqueness' or 'unique' and, as this article will point out, there are substantial ambiguities attached to the terms. So, is either the best term

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[1] Alan Race, book review in *Theology* 96 (1993), p. 419.

with which to defend and elaborate a biblically derived view of Christ? If not, are there better alternatives?

(b) The biblical and theological evidence for what is usually meant by uniqueness

If 'unique' means 'without equal or equivalent', then there is ample biblical and theological warrant for describing Christ in this kind of way.[2] From his unique conception to his unique filial relationship to God as his heavenly father; from his teaching authority and sense of eschatological mission to his resurrection and ascension, Jesus' many titles make his uniqueness clear. He is Son of God and Son of Man, Lord and only mediator, saviour and 'once for all' sacrifice. Two recent additions to the treasure chest of evidence for this uniqueness are N. T. Wright (who argues that Jesus saw himself as embodying those great self-determinants for Israel: Law, Land and Temple) and Larry Hurtado (who sees the way in which the cultic veneration of the glorified Jesus by the first Christians represented a distinctive and highly significant 'mutation' in Jewish monotheistic devotion.)[3] Some contemporary Catholic writing also offers an able defence of this traditional understanding of uniqueness.[4]

What is meant by uniqueness can be summarized along the following lines: 'Whatever statement we may choose to make about the character of God or the nature and destiny of human beings is ultimately grounded in and governed by the self-revelation of God in Christ.'[5]

(c) Several working presuppositions

But in setting out what might be meant by uniqueness (assuming for the time being that 'unique' and its cognates are the best, or among the best, terms to use) there are several methodological issues to be considered.

(i) While it is true that the evidence for what is usually called the uniqueness of Christ is clear and assured in the biblical witness, a variety of words, images and metaphors is found even there. Moreover, 'there is no systematic and full defence of these claims as a theoretical problem set against other religions'.[6] Some of the questions about the implications of the uniqueness of Christ (for example about religious and other pluralism) remain unanswered—another example of the Bible simply not giving a clear answer to some of

[2] One reasonably comprehensive example is found in Millard J. Erickson, *The Word Became Flesh: A Contemporary Incarnational Christology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1991).

[3] Larry W. Hurtado, 'Pre-70 CE Jewish Opposition to Christ-Devotion', *Journal of Theological Studies* ns 50 (1999), pp. 35-58; 'Religious Experience and Religious Innovation in the New Testament', *Journal of Religion* 80 (2000), pp. 183-205.

[4] To mention one of many possible examples: Donald J. Goergen's able defence of the sinlessness of Jesus in the discussion of uniqueness in his *Jesus, Son of God, Son of Mary, Immanuel* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1995), pp. 163-83.

[5] Alister E. McGrath, *A Passion for Truth: The Intellectual Coherence of Evangelicalism* (Leicester: Apollos, 1996), p. 51.

[6] George Brunk, 'The Exclusiveness of Jesus Christ,' in *New Directions in Mission and Evangelization*, edited by James A. Scherer and Stephen B. Evans (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1994), p. 42.

our best questions!

(ii) Nonetheless, a mere parade of words and a scrutiny of etymologies will not settle questions about uniqueness. It is commonplace to observe that theology this side of James Barr and Wittgenstein generally displays a greater understanding of the way in which context (and not merely etymology) helps determine meaning.[7] For Wittgenstein, it was the *Lebensform* ('form of living'—meaning, the customs and forms of everyday living) to which a word refers and within which it is used that is the key for determining a word's meaning. The meaning of a word is established by its use in real life. In discussing what he calls 'the main mistake made by philosophers', Wittgenstein considers it to be 'that when language is looked at, what is looked at is a form of words and not the use made of the form of words'.[8] So, the Christian *Lebensform* will help establish what the concept of the uniqueness of Christ means. Part of this *Lebensform* is the need for Christians to live and witness to Christ in a pluricultural world—and to be understood.

(iii) The power and place of metaphor is another relevant methodological issue. Even a modest encounter with literary theory will show that words, images and metaphors are not merely *additions* to thought, they are the *means* through which we think and are partly constitutive of understanding.[9] The power of metaphor lies partly in its invitation to the reader or listener to seek meaning in one direction—but not another. However, the force of metaphor is not easily contained; it cannot be constrained into narrow and predictable paths of meaning; there is always, in Paul Ricoeur's phrase, a 'surplus of meaning'. Once launched into the world of the hearer and reader, a metaphor cannot be recalled and tamed. This is one reason for choosing carefully from the range of New Testament and perhaps other possible metaphors and images for Christ; once launched into a pluralist setting they acquire a force and meaning beyond what might have been intended.

One simple example illustrates the need for such careful choice. In India, Christians seem often to underestimate the negative impact of traditional Christian language, especially the traditional metaphors of uniqueness. In a helpful reflection on his many years of enabling Christian dialogue with Hindus, Albert Nambiaparambil urges Christians to understand and anticipate the impact of language they might consider to be descriptive (for example, Jesus as 'Lord', 'Saviour', 'the Son of God').[10] The problems, he writes, are liable to be acute when Christians

[7] See, for example, Fergus Kerr, *Theology after Wittgenstein* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986).

[8] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1966), p. 2. (Kerr defines *Lebensformen* as 'the network of practices which is the community to which we belong' (*Theology after Wittgenstein*, p. 105.)

[9] See, for example, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago, IL: UCP), p. 1980.

[10] Albert Nambiaparambil, 'Evangelization and Inter-Religious Dialogue', *Indian Missiological Review*, 17.2 (June 1995), pp. 76f.

use the language of uniqueness with a dialogue partner whose worldview makes difficult the grasping of notions of uniqueness. And, Nambiaparambil asks, 'am I as a Christian disposed to grasp the offence that our Hindu… friends may take who hear my faith-assertion as totalitarian, monopolistic, exclusive, possessive and isolationist?' The solution is not Christian silence or compromised belief in Christ but more thoughtful consideration of *how* the Christian position is communicated.[11]

1. Some problems with the concept 'uniqueness'

(a) Ambiguities: unique as singular or significant?

The ambiguities attached to the meaning of uniqueness centre, in part at least, on the presence or absence of *significance*. It is probably Gabriel Moran in his *Uniqueness: Problem or Paradox in Jewish and Christian Relations*[12] who has provided the most acute analysis of the ambiguities attached to the word unique and its cognates. The semantic range is paradoxical; it actually runs in two quite different directions. There is what Moran calls meaning A: unique as particular and singular—in the sense that every thing, event or person is different. This singular and individual sense is exclusive or tends to exclusiveness of identity: no two snowflakes are the same. But it is also trivial; it is an interesting curiosity but of no great consequence that no two snowflakes are the same.

Then there is what Moran calls meaning B: unique as inclusive and relational—somehow reaching out beyond itself to include or challenge in some significant sense worthy of universal note. Moran uses the Holocaust to illustrate the difference. Obviously the Holocaust is unique in sense A; but no one, especially no Jewish person, leaves it at that. The Holocaust is usually called unique because it has *significance* and not merely *singularity*. The uniqueness of a snowflake might evoke, 'so what?'—but that's not the response to the existential uniqueness of the Holocaust, an event that is at once uniquely Jewish and uniquely and universally human.

There is a difference, therefore, between two meanings commonly assigned to uniqueness and this can lead to a degree of impatience with the word. On the one hand, its claim seems so trivial as not to be worth making. On the other hand, as Moran puts it, 'its claim is so exalted as to be beyond realization'.[13] The key differences between the two meanings seem to be (a) the degree of commonality and (b) significance.

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[11] Nambiaparambil, 'Evangelization and Inter-Religious Dialogue', p. 77. (He goes on to urge the avoidance of comparative language that implies the superiority of the Christian position; let Christ remain absolute while Christians use the language of witness to explain what Christ and the church mean to them.)

[12] See, especially, chapter 1, Gabriel Moran, *Uniqueness: Problem or Paradox in Jewish and Christian Relations*, Faith Meets Faith Series (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1992).

[13] Moran, *Uniqueness*, p. 13.

The elements in common between one snowflake and another are what render them perhaps interesting; but it is unlikely that any one snowflake, despite its unique singularity, could ever be called *significant* because of that singularity. And it is this meaning of uniqueness that has become embedded in popular usage. People employ the word 'unique' simply as a means of being emphatic about the importance of something. 'Often, the difference between an event and a unique event is merely that the speaker wishes to call attention to the latter'.[14] At the very least, 'uniqueness' is a word that most certainly had the wand of ambiguity waved over it.

(b) Popular semantics: modifying the unmodifiable

The grammatical convention is that the notion of uniqueness cannot be modified; it cannot be given a comparative or superlative form. If 'unique' means 'without equal or equivalence' then something is either unique or it is not unique. It cannot be more unique or less unique or rather unique. That convention is widely ignored—for example, when it is said that 'the Qur'an has Jesus in a very unique position'.[15] But one reason for the grammatical confusion is because of the wide semantic range that the notion of uniqueness embraces.

(c) Theological and cultural objections: unique as alienating and offensive

Many of these objections are found within the Christian world where it is said that the traditional notions of uniqueness must be abandoned as alienating and harmful. The most recent and perhaps most persuasive of these theological disavowals of uniqueness are those of John Hick and Paul Knitter. Both link their disavowals with their distaste for what they see as the inevitable and unacceptable implications of that uniqueness.[16] Hick's well known call for a 'Copernican revolution'[17] to move the Christian worldview from a christocentric to a theocentric pluralist perspective derives in part from what he repeatedly describes as the unacceptable consequences of belief in the uniqueness of Christ. Knitter simply assigns the language of uniqueness to what he sees as the legitimate confidence of Christian believers in their personal experience of Christ[18] although this does not imply assent to all or any of the traditional metaphysical claims. (Discussion returns to Knitter in section 5b below.)

It is not surprising, then, to find Gerald Anderson in a recent survey,

[14] Moran, *Uniqueness*, p. 133.

[15] Ajith Fernando, *The Supremacy of Christ* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1995), p. 53.

[16] One of the clearest statements of these supposed implications is found in Hick's 'The Non-Absoluteness of Christianity' in *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness: Toward a Pluralistic Theology of Religions*, Faith Meets Faith Series, edited by John Hick and Paul F. Knitter (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis/London: SCM, 1987), pp. 16-36; see also the critique in Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki, 'In Search of Justice', in the same work, pp. 149-61.

[17] John Hick, *God and the Universe of Faiths* (rev. ed., London: Fount/Collins, 1977), p. 131.

[18] See the widely read volume by Paul F. Knitter, *No Other Name? A Critical Survey of Christian Attitudes towards the World Religions* (NY: Maryknoll: Orbis/ London: SCM, 1985), pp. 182-86.

concluding that the

> greatest threat to [Christian] mission today comes from within the church itself, from a rampant, radical, theological relativism that denies the unique, ultimate and universal claims of the gospel.[19]

And, quite apart from the world of theology, recent western cultural history has also found fault with the Christian claim to uniqueness and the exclusivism that it seems to imply. Arnold Toynbee urged his readers to

> try to purge our Christianity of the traditional Christian belief that Christianity is unique…. We have to do this if we are to purge Christianity of the exclusive mindedness and intolerance that follow from a belief in Christianity's uniqueness.[20]

(d) Are there other ways of defining uniqueness?

So, given these problems with the notion of uniqueness, are there other words or metaphors that might better state what we want to say about Christ? A number of alternatives are available and it is helpful to use the well-known continuity-discontinuity model to arrange and to help assess the possible alternatives. As well as its organizational convenience, the model itself is still useful in pointing to a key tension that it seems must be maintained to enable faithfulness to the biblical revelation and honesty about the experience of religious pluralism. (It is interesting to note that as recently as 1999, Gerald Anderson used the continuity-discontinuity model to describe the relationship between the gospel and the religions.[21]) The strength of the continuity component of the model is that it affirms the cosmic, loving and universal relationship of God's relationship with the world; its principal weakness is that it can underestimate alienation from God. The discontinuity portion of the model affirms the particularity of and reality of the revelation and salvation-history that culminate in Christ; its weakness is that it can leave little or no place for revelation outside Christ.

2. Alternatives that emphasize continuity/commonality

Even with the alternatives that seem to relate to the continuity side of the model, there is not space to consider them all (for example, 'unparalleled', 'unsurpassable', 'unequalled', 'irreducibility').[22]

(a) Centrality

Robert Webber provides a good example of the use of centrality. His is a biblically derived argument based on 'the centrality of Christ to the entire created order'—a kind of cosmic christology in which 'that focal point around which everything else is

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[19] Gerald H. Anderson, 'Christian Mission in our Pluralist World', in *Kein anderer Name. Die Einzigartigkeit Jesu Christi und das Gespräch mit nichtchristlichen Religionen*, ed. by Thomas Schirrmacher (Nürnberg: Verlag für Thelogie und Wissenschaft, 1999), pp. 234-37 (quote from p. 234). He goes on to illustrate his assertion from a range of North American sources.

[20] Arnold Toynbee, 'What Should Be the Christian Approach to the Contemporary Non-Christian Faiths?', in *Attitudes towards Other Religions*, ed. by Owen Thomas (London: SCM, 1969), pp. 160f.

[21] Anderson, 'Christian Mission in our Pluralist World', pp. 238f.

[22] Some of the terms that are discussed read better as adjectives rather than nouns—so there is a certain mixing of these two different parts of speech in what follows.

gathered is Christ'.[23] This provision of a centre is, he feels, 'highly pertinent to the postmodern search for a center to the universe…. In the disparaging relativism of postmodernity the Christian faith speaks directly to the desire for a unified center to the world.'[24]

However, the notion of centrality does not adequately describe Christ. Some of those who reject traditional notions of uniqueness are happy to speak of the centrality of Christ—even if it is in a qualified sense. To cite Ariarajah: 'We do not mean that we should give up the centrality of Christ *for the Christian faith*, in both its historical and transcendent dimensions.'[25] It is, of course, precisely these latter dimensions that led to the notions of uniqueness and finality but Ariarajah wants to restrict such claims to the Christian worldview. Ariarajah further qualifies his position when he adds that 'it is not the positive affirmation of the centrality of Christ… that makes these words [uniqueness and finality] obsolete in a religiously plural world, but the negative implications….'[26] (The notion of christocentrism is discussed below in the category of *dis*continuity.)

(b) Supremacy / Primacy

Stephen Neill used the term supremacy in his 1984 work, *The Supremacy of Jesus*[27] and so, more recently, did Ajith Fernando.[28] Julius Lipner writes in equivalent terms when stating that Christ 'is theologically pre-eminent, i.e. that, in the final analysis, there is no theological *equivalent* for him.'[29] The description of Christ as supreme or ultimate has clear overtones of ultimacy and primacy. Nonetheless, the terms are often understood as implying continuity. They recognize what Fackre calls 'the unsurpassability of Christ, a first among equals'. In what he calls the mountain range of the great founders of religions 'the Mt. Everest in this Himalayan chain is Jesus Christ. At this summit the view of the heavens is the clearest'.[30] To be fair to both Neill and Fernando, it seems that their views of supremacy are not as generous (in the sense of an implied continuity with other the leaders of other religions) as Fackre's elaboration of the position implies.

(c) Superiority

An assertion of the supremacy or primacy of Christ among the world's religions is close to an assertion of his superiority—but, again, continuity might be implied. Eugene Hillman, for example, uses the language

[23] See chapter 7, 'Christ, the Center', Robert Webber, *Ancient-Future Faith. Rethinking Evangelicalism for a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1999), pp. 62-67 (citations from pp. 62, 66).

[24] Webber, 'Christ, the Center,' pp. 62, 67.

[25] S. Wesley Ariarajah, *Hindus and Christians. A Century of Ecumenical Thought* (Amsterdam and Grand Rapids, MI: Rodopi and Eerdmans, 1991), p. 211 (emphasis added).

[26] Ariarajah, *Hindus and Christians*, p. 211.

[27] Stephen C. Neill, *The Supremacy of Jesus:* The Jesus Library (London and Downers Grove, IL: Hodder and Stoughton and IVP, 1984)—though it must also be added that the book is oddly rambling in tone and content; in fact, the implication of its title is only fitfully asserted in its actual contents.

[28] Fernando, *The Supremacy of Christ*.

[29] Julius Lipner, 'Christians and the Uniqueness of Christ,' *Scottish Journal of Theology* 28 (1975), p. 364 (original emphasis).

[30] Gabriel Fackre, 'Christ and Religious Pluralism: the Current Debate', *Pro Ecclesia* 7 (1998), p. 392.

of superiority to claim that Christ is the best but not the only way to God.[31] Nonetheless, however much it might be seen as a factual matter of asserting superiority 'not as an attitude, but as a truth and value judgement'[32] (especially because of what might be seen as distinctiveness and originality), it is difficult to escape the negative contemporary implications of the notion of superiority. This is why others reject it. Hans Küng, for example, writes of 'the Christian self-confidently but unsuccessfully attempting to prove the superiority of Christianity'.[33]

(d) Normative / definitive

When used of Christ and salvation, Schineller sees the term normative as meaning that which 'corrects and fulfils all other mediations'.[34] Calvin Shenk believes that the term 'normativeness' best describes the witness of the biblical revelation.[35] D'Costa prefers 'normative' to 'exclusive' or 'unique' because

> by normative, one affirms more precisely the important connotations of exclusive and unique. Normative implies that nothing that is of God can contradict what we know of him through Christ.[36]

He goes on to offer a helpful analogy for the notion of normativeness. It is, he writes, not merely a question of whose photograph (or image) provides the best likeness of God, as if we were choosing from differing photos of a friend; 'Jesus is the friend that we know and in this respect all other images are judged by this one.'[37] He also adds that

> by virtue of being normative, it is being said of Jesus that here is the decisive self-utterance of God—and in this respect the important sense of uniqueness is being retained in the clearer term normative.[38]

McGrath also wants to extend and clarify the meaning of uniqueness by adding that Christ is not merely unique but definitive as well (or, more precisely, by arguing that the defence of Christ's uniqueness is 'an important first step in the defence' of his definitiveness).[39]

The advantages of the term are that it does leave room for revelation beyond the revelation found in Christ. That, of course, can also function as a disadvantage depending on the range of the inclusivism that the continuity is said to imply; whether, for example, it supposedly extends to salvation as understood in Christian categories. Much contemporary Catholic christology understands the notion of normativity in this extended manner. Roger Haight's recent

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[31] Eugene Hillman, *Many Paths. A Catholic Approach to Religious Pluralism* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1989).

[32] Origen Vasantha Jathanna, *The Decisiveness of the Christ-event and the Universality of Christianity in a World of Religious Plurality* (Berne: Peter Lang, 1981), p. 28.

[33] Hans Küng, *On Being a Christian* (ET: Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1976), p. 112.

[34] J. Peter Schineller, 'Christ and Church: A Spectrum of Views', *Theological Studies* 47 (1976), p. 556.

[35] Calvin E. Shenk, *Who Do You Say That I Am? Christians Encounter Other Religions* (Scottdale: Herald, 1997), pp. 176f.

[36] Gavin D'Costa, 'Toward a Trinitarian Theology of Religions,' in *A Universal Faith?*, ed. by Cornille and Neckebrouck (Eerdmans, 1992), p. 149.

[37] D'Costa, 'Toward a Trinitarian Theology,' p. 149 (emphasis added).

[38] D'Costa, 'Toward a Trinitarian Theology,' p. 150.

[39] McGrath, *A Passion for Truth*, p. 25.

comprehensive work on christology in a postmodern setting emphasises its universal range: 'because God is salvifically present to other religions, other representations of God can be universally normative, and thus, too, for Christians, even as Jesus Christ is universally normative'.[40] Needless to say this notion of a normativity that is both universal and reciprocal might be seen as logically odd and a redefinition of the conventional meaning of normativity.

(e) Fullness

The notion of 'fullness of revelation' is the way in which Jacques Dupuis defines Christ. He means that in Christ there is found a qualitative fullness, a fullness of intensity not found elsewhere. This fullness of revelation is not quantitative nor one of extension in all-comprehensive categories. Because God's revelation in Christ is 'expressed in a particular, relative culture… it does not—it cannot—exhaust the mystery of the divine', nor does it deny true divine revelation elsewhere.[41] The weakness of the notion of fullness is that, in common with traditional fulfilment theories, it may be 'fulfilling' needs and aspirations that are not, in fact, central to the traditions and their adherents but only to Christian interpretations of those religions. To put it simply: the non-Christian religions are not trying to be 'Christian' but failing; they are not trying to be Christian at all, and it is something of a hollow victory to fault them for being what they do not intend to be.

(f) Finality

The dictionary definition of 'finality' is usually along the lines of 'a quality of being definitely settled or irrevocable'—and so is an appropriate word to summarize the redeeming significance of the death of Christ.[42] There was a small flurry of works in the 1960s that used the phrase 'the finality of Christ', including a major study process organized by the World Council of Churches on 'The Finality of Jesus Christ in an Age of Universal History'. Lesslie Newbigin entitled chapter IV of his *The Finality of Christ* 'The Clue to History.' A central part of his argument is that, 'To speak of the finality of Christ is to speak of the Gospel as the clue to history.'[43] In particular,

> To claim finality for Christ is to endorse the judgement… that in this life, death and resurrection God himself was uniquely present and that therefore the meaning and origin and end of all things was disclosed.[44]

Julius Lipner has also used the language of finality about Christ and explains it as meaning 'that ultimately there is no theological *substitute* for him'.[45] More recently still, Clark Pinnock gave his volume *A Wideness in God's Mercy* the subtitle:

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[40] Roger Haight, *Jesus, Symbol of God* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1999), p. 422; see further on 'The Normativity of Jesus', pp. 405-10.

[41] Jacques Dupuis, *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1997), p. 379; see also p. 249.

[42] *The Finality of Christ: A Symposium on the Doctrine of Christ*, ed. by Dow Kirkpatrick (Nashville: Abingdon, 1966); Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Finality of Christ in an Age of Universal History: a Dilemma of the Third Century* (Richmond, VA: John Knox Press, 1966); J. E. Lesslie Newbigin, *The Finality of Christ* (London: SCM, 1969).

[43] Newbigin, *The Finality of Christ*, p. 65.

[44] Newbigin, *The Finality of Christ*, p. 76.

[45] Lipner, 'Christians and the Uniqueness of Christ,' p. 364 (original emphasis).

The Finality of Jesus Christ in a World of Religions.[46]

Sometimes finality is used of the Christ-event as a whole, as in the passage just cited from Lipner. Gavin D'Costa can also write that

> in Christ, God has uttered himself unreservedly; has given of his very self…. In this one particular time in history God has spoken irreversibly and with a finality that is the basis of all Christian hope.[47]

But most often the notion of finality is used of the death of Christ. Thomas Torrance, for example, uses it of the atoning death of Christ[48] (while—as we shall see—using 'singularity' to describe the person of Christ); he even uses the phrases 'absolute finality'[49] and 'absolute and eternal finality'.[50] It should also be noted that Torrance does not seem to use finality with any kind of connection with religious pluralism in mind.

On the whole, the notion of finality does fit with the reality of a degree of continuity. Carl Braaten, for example, is another who affirms finality *and* continuity, as his section heading 'Christ is God's Final, Not the Only, Revelation'[51] makes clear. Stanley Grenz has opted for the term 'finality', apparently with some kind of continuity in mind given his immediate elaboration that 'Jesus is the center of God's self-disclosure. In him we find the clear picture of what God is like.'[52] But there are some exceptions to the assertion of possible continuity; Roy Musasiwa also uses the language of finality but he is emphatic that there is no continuity with, in his case, African traditional religion.[53]

The virtue of the term finality is that it signals conclusiveness and the end of a process that has reached an ultimate purpose. It also suggests an unrepeatability, especially of the atoning significance of the cross of Christ, that is certainly defensible from the mainstream of the Christian tradition. But there are problems if the word finality is applied to divine revelation because the term could be seen as 'freezing' revelation and implying that God no longer acts revealingly. And the term remains unacceptable to an ecumenical proponent of dialogue on the grounds that 'every attempt to reflect theologically about other faiths that has begun with the finality of Jesus Christ, interpreted in its various forms, has ended in Christian chauvinism and paternalism'.[54] Ariarajah's conclusion is clearly disputable but evangelicals ought at least to hear his comments as a warning.

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[46] Clark Pinnock, *A Wideness in God's Mercy: The Finality of Jesus Christ in a World of Religions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1992).

[47] D'Costa, 'Toward a Trinitarian Theology,' p. 150.

[48] Thomas F. Torrance, 'The Atonement, The Singularity of Christ and the Finality of the Cross: The Atonement and the Moral Order', in *Universalism and the Doctrine of Hell*, ed. by Nigel de S. Cameron (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1992), especially in the section 'The Finality of the Cross' (pp. 233-48).

[49] Torrance, 'The Atonement', p. 233.

[50] Torrance, 'The Atonement', p. 244.

[51] See, Carl Braaten, *No Other Gospel! Christianity among the World's Religions* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1992), pp. 65-82.

[52] Stanley J. Grenz, 'Toward an Evangelical Theology of the Religions', *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 31 (1994), p. 64. He goes on to state that, 'For all the exclusivism it implies, the confession of the finality of Christ nonetheless remains an inclusivist—perhaps even a pluralist—declaration' (p. 64).

[53] Roy B. Musasiwa, 'The Finality of Jesus in Africa', *Evangelical Review of Theology* 17 (1993), pp. 65-69.

[54] Ariarajah, *Hindus and Christians*, p. 211.