

# World Religions and the Christian Claim for the Uniqueness of Jesus Christ

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Religious traditions other than the Christian constitute part of the Indian-Christian existential as well as hermeneutical context. Both the questions posed and possibilities offered by extra-Christian religions of the world cannot but become the essential data for our theological reflection today. If our theology is to do with the day to day faith experience and praxis of our communities of faith it cannot but be a *responsive* theology formulated in conscious response to the richness of other religious traditions, not simply on a theoretical level but in the concrete hopes and aspirations of Indians as well. However, one wonders whether thousands of Indian-Christians may not find it difficult to say with Fielding's parson Thwackum,

When I mention religion, I mean the Christian religion; and not only the Christian religion but the Protestant religion; and not only the Protestant religion, but the Church of England.<sup>1</sup>

(Of course, for some others it may be another Protestant or a Roman or Orthodox tradition.)

Even when other religious traditions and their truth claims are taken into consideration, often our interest seems to turn around the nature of the missiological and apologetic approaches of the Church to non-Christian faiths. Serious attempts to re-think and reformulate the central Christian faith affirmations are few and far between. The Christian claim for the finality of Christ is one such central construct that needs to be examined and reconstrued as we encounter corresponding claims for universality in several other religions. This paper is a tentative attempt to do so. Its primary concern is meta-theological and formal, though a brief indication of the structure of a responsive Christology in the context of world religions is also attempted.

In the first part, it attempts to grapple with the phenomenon of religious pluralism and multiple truth claims; part 2 describes

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<sup>1</sup> John Hick, *God and the Universe of Faiths*, New York, St Martin's Press, 1973, p. 102.

a few prevalent Christologies showing them as inadequate to take the religiously plural context seriously. In the third part, I identify, in a highly tentative manner, the presuppositions and formal requirements of a *responsive* Christology, meaningful in the context of world religions.

## I Truth Claims in the Context of Religious Pluralism

Before attempting to place various truth claims or claims to uniqueness and universality within a meaningful frame of reference, let us turn to an analysis of our context in which human religious consciousness is shaped by increasing interaction and inter-dependence of various religious traditions of the world. Observation and analysis of the phenomenon of world religion raise several important issues and insights for our understanding of the nature of religious traditions in themselves, the hermeneutical problematic they constitute for a responsive theology etc.

### 1. *Religions of the world are inter-related in a continuum*

Comparative study of religions during the past several decades seems to have established that the religions of the world can no longer be seen as isolated, mutually exclusive, and static systems of belief; rather they seem to function as reciprocally interacting reality-defining-processes within a single dynamic continuum of the religious life of humans. Their relationship to each other is more analogous to that of "various species within a single genus." As one of the philosophers of religion exhorts us,

We should see the religious life of mankind as a dynamic continuum within which major disturbances have from time to time set up new fields of force, of greater or lesser extent, displaying complex relationships of attraction and repulsion, absorption, resistance and reinforcement. These major disturbances are the great creative religious moments in human history from which distinguishable religious traditions have stemmed.<sup>2</sup>

If they do belong to a single continuum, then as a leading historian of religion so aptly puts it,

The boundaries in time and space and conceptuality that we erect around given systems, turn out to be postulates of doctrine rather than facts of history.<sup>3</sup>

No religious tradition can be described apart from its interconnectedness with all else in its environment. It can be established that this has been the case in the Jewish, Christian, Hindu and Islamic traditions to this day.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 102.

<sup>3</sup> W. C. Smith, "Interpreting Religious Interrelations: An Historian's View of Christian and Muslim," *Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses*, 6/5 (Summer, 1976-77), p. 516.

But such an inter-relatedness does not warrant any notion of a strict one-to-one correspondence between different religions. For they, as diverse processes attempting to define the totality of experience for particular communities of faith, differ in performing their organising function "not only in structuring and directing the individual's self-understanding and behaviour but also in ordering cultural values and social patterns."<sup>4</sup> I think that it is very important to remember this fact. Or else we cannot adequately perceive the untenability of the attempts such as those of some Neo-Advaitins in India toward "indiscriminate synthesising."

At the same time the opposite conclusion that each religious system is a totally relative and isolated empirical entity with its own independent history and characteristics is rejected as well.

The notion of organic inter-relatedness of religious traditions rejects also the idea that one religion is qualitatively different from others. The difference can never be conceived in terms of difference in kind. Therefore, repeated attempts that we find in history to view one's own tradition as entirely different in kind from others are not proper. It would also mean that no one can speak of one religion as being true or false in the light of and by the standards of one's own religion any more than he or she can speak of a whole cultural system as being true or false.

## 2. *Religions of the world or historical*

This implies that one must be wary of isolating religions of the world from the concrete historical context and speak of them in a vacuum. Authentic religion is not primarily a set of beliefs in this or that "supernatural" entity or object or person. It is rather that at the heart of every religion is the "conviction that the values one holds are grounded in the inherent structure of reality, that between the way one ought to live and the way things really are there is an unbreakable inner connection."<sup>5</sup> In other words, every religion is a way, a *marga*, a way of looking at the world, a way of being in the world, in relation to what is taken to be the inherent structures of reality itself. The religiousness of a community of faith is not just one element in the total pattern of life of that community but rather it is *the one pattern* within which all other elements of life find their meaning, relative significance and ultimate fulfilment. In this sense, all religions are through and through soteriological, however it is defined. Therefore, a religion cannot be defined by what its adherents

<sup>4</sup> G. Rupp, "Dialogue and Religious Affirmations," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, VII (Summer, 1970), p. 548.

<sup>5</sup> C. Geertz, "From *Sine Qua Non* to Cultural Symbol System," in W. H. Capps, ed., *Ways of Understanding Religion*, New York, Macmillan, 1972, p. 185.

believe as doctrines, but rather by the way they orient their day to day life. In this sense, religions are not only reality-defining processes but also life-orienting inclusive symbol systems. As such they are radically temporal and in need of continuous re-formulation.

As reality-defining processes and life-orienting symbol systems, religions are comprehensive, that is, their scope of meaning for their adherents includes all of life in a given context. Clifford Geertz, after years of his cultural anthropological studies of religious tradition, suggests that religion by definition and function is a system or complex of symbols that provides a basic integration or congruence between "a particular style of life and a specific (more often implicit) metaphysic . . ."<sup>6</sup> It plays the decisive role of providing the necessary and comprehensive synthesis between "a people's ethos—the tone, character and quality of their life, its moral and aesthetic style and mood—and their world-view, the picture they have of the way things in sheer actualities are, their most comprehensive idea of order."<sup>7</sup>

If so, the symbol system must be able to address the whole range of human experience. The religiousness of humans is not simply belief in a set of doctrines taken to be revealed supernaturally, but a way of life, a reality-defining and life-orienting process. Apart from reference to the concrete life and strength of adherents of a given religion, it cannot be fully understood. If so, W.C. Smith is right in exhorting us thus :

Let no one imagine that the question of what is happening to Islam in Pakistan is anything other than the question of what is happening to man in Pakistan. . . Let no one imagine that the question of cow in India is anything less than the question of how we men are to understand ourselves and our places in the universe. The Buddhist's involvement in politics in Vietnam is a political question but also a question of our relation to eternity. . . . If we do not see this, and cannot make our public see it, then whatever else we may be, we are not historians of religion.<sup>8</sup>

This exhortation applies equally to theologians as well.

### 3. *Religions of the world are processive or dynamic*

Human religious consciousness cannot but be dynamic. As life is dynamic and ever-renewing, so will human religiousness

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures*, New York, Harper, 1973, p. 89.

<sup>8</sup> "Traditional Religions and Modern Culture," *Proceedings of the XIth International Congress of the International Association of the History of Religions*, vol. I, Leiden, E. J. Brill, 1968, p. 65.

be, for, essentially, religion is life-orienting, fulfilling and transcending. There is another intrinsic reason for religions being processive or dynamic. The religious experience is a constant movement from the particular or the concrete to the universal. Whitehead in defining religion states that it is an "ultimate craving to infuse into the insistent particularity of emotion that non-temporal generality which primarily belongs to conceptual thought alone."<sup>9</sup> Elsewhere he states, "Rational religion appeals to the direct intuition of *special* occasions, and to the elucidatory power of its concepts for *all* occasions. It arises from that which is special, but it extends to what is general." This inner dynamic of every religion must be taken note of. For religious truth claims and assertions of universality arise out of this dynamic, a constant movement from the particular to the general, the concrete to the universal. Gordon Kaufman observes that religious symbol systems are built around "certain crucial events in our history through which the meaning of the rest of our experience has been illuminated and without which it would have been dark or very different."<sup>10</sup> In such experiences certain moments are more crucial and more decisive than others for the understanding of the whole range of experience. The context of religious pluralism and careful study of the phenomenon of religion in general have enabled us to see our own religious experience, as any other non-Christian experience, as a process of fusion of particularity and universality, a process through which reality-defining, life-orienting and self-transcending symbol systems emerge. In every religion a decisive pattern of meaning is abstracted from some concrete event and then the "larger tracts of history" and experience are meaningfully interpreted within that pattern.

If the phenomenon of religion is understood, as I have attempted to establish, to be a symbol-making process in which a particular moment of historical experience comes to assume a controlling "interpretive role" for the believers in their understanding of themselves and the universe, then the most useful and adequate way of defining the unique character of the central event is *paradigmatic*. In other words, the uniqueness of a religiously significant experience or nexus of experiences within a religious tradition and its consequent truth-claim is not to be found in its supernatural or unusual character, but rather in its power to function as a paradigm providing integrative meaning for the totality of experience. *A paradigm is a decisive pattern of meaning consisting of primary and secondary symbols that are centred and unified around the primary symbol.* Jesus the Christ and Gautama the Buddha are such central or primary symbols around which Christians and Buddhists respectively find the paradigma-

<sup>9</sup> *Process and Reality*, New York, Harper, p. 23.

<sup>10</sup> *Relativism, Knowledge and Faith*, Chicago, Chicago University Press, 1960, p. 107.

tic power and significance for their life-orientation and fulfilment. These core events, experiences or symbols, "for those who hold them . . . are not inductive, they are paradigmatic."<sup>11</sup> A paradigm is the decisive instance, the core pattern, that holds forth before the believer most directly and most persuasively a structure of personal/communal existence as authentic possibility for him/her. A paradigm comes to be when some specific, unique, historical event provokes an interpretation whose symbolic value becomes decisive for orienting lives and providing archetypal meaning. The more a paradigm is able to fuse historical event and symbolic meaning, the more decisive its paradigmatic significance becomes. The power and the decisiveness of a paradigm or core-symbol depends on the extent to which it is perceived to fulfil the following functions :<sup>12</sup>

(i) to fuse the universal and particular, that is, a particular event or experience comes to tune "human actions to an envisaged cosmic order and (to) project images of cosmic order into the plane of human experience ;"

(ii) "to establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in (humans) ;"

(iii) "to clothe the stories, images and concepts that express the paradigm 'with such an aura of factuality' that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic."

I am certain that it can be argued cogently that the claim for finality and universality in a given religion to its core-vision or central-symbol is, in fact, a claim for its "paradigmatic decisiveness" as described above. It seems to me that in a religiously pluralistic situation, it is this understanding of a particular religion's central truth-claim that can really make sense. All other interpretations of rival truth claims will tend to drive or exclude one tradition from others.

When once we define the core-vision or central symbol that arises out of a formative experience in a religious symbol system in terms of "paradigm," we can proceed to make a few further observations.

(i) Since the primary function of a paradigm is to provide significant meaning, cohesiveness and aura of reality to the whole range of human experience, holding before the believer possibilities of an authentic mode-of-being-in-the-world, it is possible that in a given context some paradigm can be adjudged as more decisive than others. A distinction and valuing in terms of degree of decisiveness and comprehensiveness is legitimate. One paradigm and not the other can be said to be more or less decisive, potent and unique than others for a given believer or community of faith.

<sup>11</sup> C. Geertz, "From *Sine Qua Non* to Cultural Symbol System," p. 186.

<sup>12</sup> Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures*, p. 90f. I am indebted to Geertz for my understanding of the role of formative symbols in religious traditions.

But the criterion of decisiveness is *intrinsic* to the experiencing individual or community and cannot be applied by an "external" observer. This fact must be borne in mind.

(ii) If the legitimate understanding of the primacy of one paradigm over others for a particular faith-community is placed on its *functional decisiveness* in interpreting the whole range of experience and orienting and fulfilling (saving) life, then claims for decisiveness advanced in terms of supernatural or ecstatic origin, chronological priority, ontologically different status etc. should be rejected as untenable. It is important for us Christians, for in the history of our tradition a claim for decisiveness of Christ is often advanced on grounds other than the paradigmatic function of the Christ-event.

(iii) Moreover, it can be argued that, in the light of the dynamic and processive nature of the religious life of humans, we can affirm that no paradigm can ever be final in the sense of chronological finality or exhaustiveness. As religions interact and as the corporate critical self-awareness of religious communities is enhanced and therewith the depth of the totality of experience, one may come to question the continued decisiveness of a paradigm. When this happens one may completely switch over to a new paradigm and thus experience "conversion."

(iv) Within an authentic dialogical context where believers of two or more religious traditions come to share their core-vision or paradigmatic event or experience, each of them may be led to reconceive the super-structure, the secondary stories and symbols that express their faith while the infra-structure, the centre of the paradigmatic pattern will remain identifiably the same.<sup>18</sup> For example, in a dialogical living and sharing with our Hindu neighbours we may appropriate Hindu stories and in the light of them enrich our paradigmatic pattern of faith; the core-symbol and the unifying centre will remain the Christ-event.

While this section has been rather abstract and theoretical, it is hoped that all that is said about the phenomenon of religion in general can be applied to the Christian affirmation of the decisiveness of the Christ-event. Before moving on to the next section let me sum up the discussion thus far:

(i) Religions of the world are inter-related, historically processive.

(ii) Each is a reality-defining symbol system to interpret the whole range of human experience in terms of certain significant

<sup>18</sup> Bernard F. Lonergan, "Prolegomena to the Study of the Emerging Religious Consciousness of our Time," *Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses*, IX, 1 (1980), pp. 3-17. This article by Lonergan is highly suggestive for developing the sort of position advocated in this paper, though Lonergan will not share the conclusions reached here.

core-events or experiences. These core-symbols become primary centres around which secondary symbols and stories are organised.

(iii) Each claims that the central historical event or experience is adequate to illumine, orient and lead to fulfilment (salvation) the totality of human experience. It is important to note that, in this sense, truth is not primarily a quality of propositions and doctrinal affirmation but rather praxiological, belonging to the realm of life-orientation and transformation.

(iv) In this context, finality is not a proper term to express the decisiveness of the core-symbol or central patterns of meaning; for they function as paradigms and their significance is paradigmatic significance.

(v) It is possible to speak of one paradigm being more or less decisive than others for a particular believer or a community. But inter-paradigmatic comparison is not possible without an authentic dialogical context. Comparisons are made in terms of paradigmatic and functional criteria and not in terms of criteria established in terms of ecstatic or supernatural grounds.

(vi) Inclusiveness or comprehensiveness as well as processive or dynamic temporality provide a paradigm its ability to fuse particularity and universality. The more the paradigm can do it, the more inclusive and decisive it can be for a community of faith.

As was mentioned earlier, these formal reflections can be applied to the Christian faith as well as the Christian central truth claim about the Christ-event.

## II Some Inadequate Christian Claims for the Uniqueness of Christ in the Context of Religious Pluralism

Due to the limited scope of this essay both in terms of its length and its tentative character, I cannot argue at length in order to establish my criteria for adjudicating some christological models as inadequate in the context of religious pluralism. Nor can I extensively set forth the positions that are criticised as inadequate either. I shall limit myself only to identifying simply four "types" that I deem as problematic.<sup>14</sup>

As George Rupp cogently argues, the most characteristic variable that distinguishes one Christology from another, parti-

<sup>14</sup> For the following manner of classifying I am indebted to J. P. Schineller, S. J., "Christ and Church: A Spectrum of Use," *Theological Studies* 37 (Dec. 1976), pp. 545-66; L. Richard, "Some Recent Developments on the Question of Christology and World Religions," in *Église Théologie* 8 (Mai 1977), pp. 209-44; George E. Rupp, *Christologies and Culture: Towards a Typology of World Views*, The Hague, Mouton, 1974. Rupp's *Beyond Existentialism and Zen*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1979, is also a significant discussion on religion in a pluralistic context.



cularly in the context of religious pluralism, is the description of the significance attributed to the redemptive work of Christ. He says:

The connection is perhaps most immediately evident from the perspective of considering the Atonement... To take the point at which the connection is most direct, the way in which a given interpreter of the atonement treats the *eph hapax*—the once for all claim for the work of Christ—cannot but have implications for his approach to non-Christian religious traditions.<sup>15</sup>

In the Christian tradition, often the finality claim for the work of Christ is based upon one of the following four understandings of the work of Christ: Christ's work is understood (i) as an exclusive act, (ii) as an inclusive act that has altered the general and universal situation, (iii) as a non-temporal act that transcends the normal historical process and (iv) as a temporal and processive act which finds its significance through the working out of historical processes. The uniqueness of Christ is a derivative one. It arises out of the concern of individuals or the community of faith to advance their claim for Christ in terms of change which they experience in their lives. Let me briefly turn to the four types that I want to indicate as diverse models for the atoning work of Christ.

### 1. *Uniqueness in terms of Christ's exclusive salvific work*

This view starts with the basic affirmation that all religions, including Christianity, are "unbelief" and as such "exorcised without mercy" by God. But the act of God in Christ is the exclusive "deposit of God's own disclosure" which has broken into history and therefore stands in judgement on all human religiosity, "the working capital of sin." The phrases that I have used in the sentences above are taken from Barth's *Church Dogmatics*. As R. Richard Niebuhr puts it, in this exclusive view of the work of Christ, "revelation is the disclosure of God's history and not ours.....We are involved in *divine inner history*, but not God in *our history*."<sup>16</sup> This act is in God's time, the transcendent time during the time of the years A.D. 1-30. We are not saved in time but as "...the Holy Scriptures and the proclamation of the message call and *transpose* us from our time into that time, namely into the time of Jesus Christ."<sup>17</sup> Here then is a theological model that by conceiving the world of Christ as exclusive, atemporal, rather transtemporal, and once and for all, leaves no room for any contact with religions of the world. It does not meet any of the criteria that we identified above.

<sup>15</sup> Rupp, *Christologies and Culture*, p. 4.

<sup>16</sup> "Religion and the Finality of Christ," *Harvard Divinity School Bulletin*, 27 (April 1963), p. 27.

<sup>17</sup> *Church Dogmatics*, III:2, p. 66.

## 2. *Uniqueness of Christ as inclusive and constitutive of all humans and cosmos whether they are aware of it or not*

Karl Rahner is the best representative of this view. The work of Christ has already and objectively altered man's existential structure and made it into a "horizon of revelation." Christ's death had really modified the existential nature of man and has endowed it with an *Übernatürliche Existential*. It is the "supernatural existential" of humanity which has been universally and objectively constituted by the saving act of Jesus Christ. If this is so, then when the claims of the Church, which is "humanity consecrated by the Incarnation," confronts a non-Christian, it does not confront him or her as a member of an extra-Christian religion. Because of his prior experience of the universal grace it confronts him only as an "anonymous Christian." In this sense non-Christian religions are somehow part of the development of Christianity itself and therefore intended by God in the same way as everything else about salvation. As C. J. Eichhorst suggests in a lighter vein, "whereas it was once extremely hard to be inside the Church, in this interpretation it is extremely hard to be outside. Christo-centric grace—God's saving will—has triumphed."<sup>18</sup>

While other religions are not false, there is something unnatural about them. For the word anonymous identifies "in a certain sense an unnatural condition, a condition that ought not to exist because the nature of being under consideration...aims at overcoming this namelessness."<sup>19</sup> Complete fullness is effected when one comes fully into the "incarnatory dynamics of Christ."

The uniqueness of Christ is thus in his literally being "the summit of creation, the Lord and head of the human race," the *pleroma*. In this sense Rahner's is an universalism and inclusive uniqueness that paradoxically preserves the exclusivism of Christ and Christ alone. Several *logos* christologies of recent times share with Rahner this type of what I call the "constitutive" uniqueness of Christ. The recent christological thinking of John Cobb identifies Christ as the name for any creative transformation throughout the universe. For Cobb, Logos and Christ are identified and therefore he says, "In this sense, Christians can name as Christ creative transformation in art, in persons of other faiths, and in the planetary biosphere."<sup>20</sup>

## 3. *Uniqueness of Christ is inclusive but is in the sole normative character of Christ*

If in the first two positions, a radical Christo-centrism is operative, in the third position, the centre is God and God's

<sup>18</sup> "From Outside the Church to the Inside," *Dialog* 12 (Summer, 1973), p. 195.

<sup>19</sup> "Anonymous Christianity and the Mission of the Church," *IODC International* 1 (April 4, 1970), p. 73.

<sup>20</sup> *Christ in a Pluralistic Age*, Philadelphia, Westminster, 1975, p. 87.

saving relation and act to humans and cosmos. H. Richard Niebuhr is a typical representative of this type. Both the types that we have identified above seem to substitute Christology for theology. This third position can affirm God's relation to all else apart from Christ. For Christ is neither the exclusive nor the constitutive reality of the salvific way. But in Christ is the decisive demonstration of God's love and therefore Christ's uniqueness is in his normative function in judging and valuing all other experiences of God. Eugene TeSelle also speaks of Christ's uniqueness in terms of the clarity of God's saving act in Christ and therefore he can function as the "touchstone" of all other religious hopes, aspirations and affirmations. As he puts it:

The humanity of Jesus, although it is shaped by and attests to the Word, neither exhausts the Word nor is the sole means of access to it, for the Word is both knowable and efficacious elsewhere. The uniqueness of Jesus—a uniqueness which should not be seen apart from the uniqueness of Israel and the Church—will consist then in being the touchstone by which other responses are judged, the achievement by which their deficiencies are overcome, the centre of gravity around which they cluster.<sup>21</sup>

A little earlier, criticizing Rahner for his doctrine of anonymous Christianity, TeSelle writes:

The consequences of his theory of the omnipresence of grace, taken to their full extent, are precisely the opposite of what Rahner suggests: it is not that everything must be organized around the one figure of Jesus, but Jesus is the complete and definitive expression of a relationship between God and man which is present, at least potentially, from the very first and which can be acknowledged and approximated to some degree at any time and place.<sup>22</sup>

As it has been already expressed, it is the third position, which comes closest to affirming the uniqueness of Christ without negating the authentic possibility of salvific experience in and through non-Christian religious traditions. However, this position needs to be strengthened and in the process transposed from its emphasis upon the normative character to that of a paradigmatic decisiveness. To that task we shall turn in the next section. But before that let me briefly identify a fourth type, which is not very common, but a possible *limiting* case.

#### 4. *Jesus as one among the many mediators of God's saving grace and hence a reluctance to speak of Christ's uniqueness*

This is the position that begins with a radical affirmation of its theocentrism. If God is God, God must have and does operate

<sup>21</sup> E. TeSelle, *Christ in Context*, Philadelphia, Westminster, 1975, p. 164.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 163.

through various agents or mediators of salvation. Christ is surely the pre-eminent among them. God can have no special people or favoured way through which alone one can attain the fullness of salvation. Several of those who belonged to the group known as the New England Transcendentalists, particularly men like Emerson, advocated such a view. We find many among the Hindu thinkers often holding some such views. If all our formulations of God and God's ways with humans are ultimately inadequate, can there be any one of such finite ways that can be exclusively, constitutively or normatively unique? Elements of this position can also be identified in Paul Tillich. Describing what he calls the "mystical movement" in religious experience he says:

This mystical movement means that one is not satisfied with any of the concrete expressions of the Ultimate, of the Holy. One goes beyond them. Man goes to the one beyond any manifoldness. The Holy as Ultimate lies beyond any of its embodiments. The embodiments are justified. They are accepted as secondary. One must go beyond them in order to reach the highest, the Ultimate itself. The particular is denied for the Ultimate One. The concrete is devalued.<sup>23</sup>

We have seen claims of the uniqueness of Christ in terms such as exclusive, constitutive as well as normative. As a limiting type, one may refuse to speak of any uniqueness of Christ except that of a specific particularity. But, in the context of multiple truth claims regarding the uniqueness of one's own religious tradition, I submit, understanding of Christ's uniqueness as paradigmatic or representative may be helpful. While I cannot fully develop such a christological affirmation, I want to identify briefly its possible shape. For it seems to me that by describing Christ as the decisive paradigm of God's intention for our authentic mode-of-being, paradigm of our authentic selfhood, as well as our self-transcendence, we shall be able to affirm the distinctness of the structure of existence in Christ Jesus, and yet hold the Christian way as only one among others. Without claiming any qualitative-ontological difference in status, we can still seriously examine and compare the possibilities offered in various religious traditions.

### III Decisiveness of Christ as the Paradigm for the God—All Else Relationship

As we suggested in Part I, the decisiveness of a paradigm is dependent upon its holistic or comprehensive as well as its dynamic or processive character. A Christ-paradigm when construed as both organic or holistic and *processive* could be said to be unique and decisive, more inclusive and more dynamic. In a highly tentative manner let me identify some elements of an organic and

<sup>23</sup> Paul Tillich, *The Future of Religions*, p. 87.

processive Christology which will be more adequate in the context of religious pluralism.

### 1. Christology in an organic paradigm and the uniqueness of Christ

(i) An organic model sees the universe as an integrated spatio-temporal process. The world with all its plural entities is understood in terms of a single order theory of reality. While all differences in depth, dimensions and degrees are accepted, it is held that no entity is ontologically different from another. When such an organic or holistic view of the world is used as the framework for the Christ paradigm, there are several significant advantages. Let me identify some of them here.

(a) In such a model Jesus need not be conceived as being in any way ontologically different from other persons. He is not an intruder from another sphere as it were. Much of the traditional christological formulations of the Latin Church have attempted to locate the true person of Jesus Christ in primarily the divine and thereby tended to separate Jesus in a category altogether different from us, humans. But, within an organic model which views all of reality within a single structure, Christ will not be one who stands outside the ontological categories of the human. He is paradigmatically significant precisely because his decisiveness is experienced by humans as meaningful within their structure of existence. Chenchiah writing about forms of western Christologies and their meaninglessness in the religiously plural context of India says :

...the Latin isolationism, which in its anxiety to present Jesus as unique, lifts Him out of all human context, *can never take root* in the Indian mind which...can never reconcile itself to the doctrine of unbridgeable gulf between God and man...<sup>24</sup>

Elsewhere he laments :

The primary error which deflected the true current of thought as to Jesus began when we set him along with God over against man...This...is a total distortion of the purpose of the meaning and message of Jesus...The Incarnation has its spearhead towards creation. To turn it round and make it face heaven is to reverse its purpose...<sup>25</sup>

(b) It also implies that the mode of God's activity and relation in Jesus Christ and the mode of God's presence and activity in all else must be conceived in an analogous manner. The mode of

<sup>24</sup> Chenchiah cited in R. Boyd, *An Introduction to Indian Christian Theology*, Madras, CLS, revised edn., 1975, p. 150.

<sup>25</sup> D. A. Thangaswamy, *The Theology of Chenchiah*, Bangalore/Madras, CISRS/CLS, 1967, p. 96.

God's presence in Jesus is not in any way qualitatively distinct from the mode of his presence anywhere else in creation. However, in affirming the above, we need not and do not deny any difference between Jesus and other humans. On the contrary, a decisive difference of degree can be clearly and meaningfully established within an organic model as we shall see below. It is only when a Christology meets this formal requirement of Christ not being ontologically different from all-else, that it can present the finality of Christ in terms of a paradigmatic decisiveness which can be meaningful within the context of religious pluralism.

(ii) The organic model also affirms that all entities are really and organically related to each other. Speaking of relation within the "whole of reality in an organic model," Whitehead says, "Connectedness is the essence of all existence...No fact is merely by itself." Within such a view causation is not merely external. The cause and the consequence are internally and really related. God brings things and persons into being not by an external fiat, by working as a potter works on clay, but by making himself available for the internal incorporation and constitution of that which comes to be. Such a view radically challenges the traditional christological assertions where the centre of consciousness of Jesus is said to have been *replaced* by the eternal logos or the second person in the Trinity. But the operation of the efficient cause is not external but internal, not by replacement but by incorporation. A person is constituted in and through his internal incorporation of all the data that he grasps in his environment as relevant for his becoming. Christologically, this notion of causation enables us to describe the person of Christ as constituted by his active relation and response to God and all-else in his environment in the most ideal way so that his person is the paradigmatic case, classic instance, of what it is to be human. Within an organic model of reality, an experiencing subject becomes what it is by a process of "constitutive incorporation" of aspects of entities in its world to a greater or lesser degree according to its perception of relevance of various aspects of its world for its own becoming. Within such an organic understanding of causality, we then affirm that Jesus is the Christ and hence decisive because his constitutive incorporation of God, other human and all aspects of his world was in total correspondence to what God intended that it would be. Hence what Jesus was is just what God intended him to be. In this sense, Jesus is the God-intended paradigm for all our becoming.

But in an organic relationship there is not only an efficient causation as described above for the becoming of an entity; the entity that thus becomes also has its own influence in varying degrees on all around. Therefore, we can portray Jesus not only as effected by his perfect response to God and all-else, but also as having determinant influence on others by standing in a significant and decisively causal relationship to our whole experience.

(iii) The notion of organic togetherness helps us also to reject any notion of mechanistic or materialistic causation. As David Griffin indicates,

This is necessary, in the first place, in order to have a usable notion of causation...Not only would this rule out any talk of Jesus' free response. But, for the Christian Christ is supposed to be the supreme and hence the defining case of God-man relationship, and an answer to the problem of evil. And yet, if the idea of causality that is used in talking of the divine influence in Jesus is a deterministic one, then the Creator-creature relationship is defined in a way that makes the problem of evil theologically insoluble...<sup>26</sup>

(iv) Fourthly, in an organic model the plural entities that constitute it can be described as "actual," as "selves" or even "subjects." The process philosophy of Whitehead and Hartshorne attempts to develop an organic model where all constituent entities are "subjects," agential selves in relation. A human society of inter-related selves is an organism. When it is defined in this way, the notions of efficient causation and self-determination of the selves can be meaningfully correlated. This correlation is very important for a christological model—as it is also for an understanding of historical human selves. When the person of Christ is described in terms of this correlation between the efficient causation (of both God and other selves) and self-causation, several advantages are there: one of them is indicated below.

The uniqueness of Jesus' person can be conceived in terms of the uniqueness of the particular mode or the nature of the correlation between efficient causation and self-causation. When we do so, we can avoid two of the christological extremes: on the one hand, the monophysite tendencies that insisted in understanding all of Christ in terms of God's efficient causation alone and, on the other, the adoptionistic tendencies in the history of Christian thought that identified his uniqueness purely in terms of his human response, his self-causation. Instead, the uniqueness can be meaningfully construed in terms of both the divine presence and Christ's receptivity. In this sense, this formal requirement can even reinterpret the concerns of the Chalcedonian Formula of two natures without using its dubious "substance" terminology.

## 2. *The Processive Dimension of the Model and Christology*

We saw earlier that it is only within a processive world-view that we can meaningfully speak of a *decisive* paradigm among other paradigms within a dynamic historical continuum. The model

<sup>26</sup> D. Griffin, "The Essential Elements of a Contemporary Christology," *Encounter* XXXIII: 2 (Spring, 1972), pp. 173-74.

herein proposed is not only organic but also processive. It should be pointed out that the term processive is used primarily to indicate the dynamic, historical and temporal character of "actuality." While the notion "organic" attempts to define the relational characteristics of reality in terms of *spatial* metaphors, the term processive stands for defining the relational character of entities in terms of historical and *temporal* dimensions. It describes the course and direction of the actual entities in reality. It should be clearly borne in mind that it does not imply "a systematic forward movement resulting in growth or decay." It is *not* a thorough-going evolutionary perspective that we have here in mind.

(i) A Processive Christology is radically historical. It is rooted in a concrete historical event. The basic revelatory event is rooted in the historical person of Jesus and not merely the biblical picture of him. It is that particular event (not in the sense of some clearly specifiable and measurable relatively short duration of time) which stands in a significant and meaningful relation to all our experiences in time. Therefore to say that it is historical is to say that it is rooted in a particular historical event and on the other hand, to affirm that the root-event has significant impact on our total historical experience. As R.W. Emerson described it, the "name of Jesus is not so much written as ploughed into history."<sup>27</sup>

(ii) It also means that the Christ-event cannot be described apart from the total history of which Jesus is confessed to be the significant and decisive key. No historical person can be understood in isolation from the past history out of which he emerges and from the total culture of which he is a part. Nor can he be understood apart from all his relationship with those who are associated with him, influence him and in turn are influenced by him. Even this is not adequate. No historical person can be understood unless the consequences of his impact on history are also taken seriously into account. Therefore, to state that the christological model is processive is to mean that only within a continuum of past, present and future relations of Jesus with God, humans and world could the person of Jesus adequately be understood. The historical reality of the Church which remembers, interprets and proclaims Jesus becomes an essential datum for a processive Christology. As Pittenger puts it:

If God's activity must be taken as having occurred in and through the whole constellation of which this figure is the centre, it must not be confined solely and exclusively to him as an individual man.<sup>28</sup>

If this is so, to construct an adequate Christology the totality of human experience, including the factor of religious pluralism

<sup>27</sup> Cited in N. W. Pittenger, *Christology Reconsidered*, London, SCM Press, 1970, p. 25.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*



and plural truth-claims, should be taken seriously. Christologies that take this total context seriously cannot describe Christ in a historical terms.

(iii) A processive Christology will also reject any significance of Christ and his work conceived in terms of atemporal or trans-temporal categories. We have seen earlier attempts to define the finality of Christ in terms of atemporality described as "fulfilled time" which is above *our* time, or in the existential moment of the inner self which is not "*in*" history but "*within*" history, or by absolutising a concrete historical moment, turning it into cosmic dimensions.

But to accept the processive notion is to reject these ahistorical attempts. It is to reject any notion of a universalised "once-and-for-all moment" which excludes and falsifies all other moments. The processive view would affirm, however, a central moment among many other moments in the process of history as having the paradigmatic significance of pointing to and interpreting significantly the totality of the process. One moment, the nodal or decisive moment of the historic Christ-event, stands within all other revelatory moments as *one of them in kind* and yet its place in relation to the totality of experience is so significant and integrative that it has come to be and function as the most determinative paradigm. Such a view takes seriously the truth claims of all religions and attempts to interpret the Christian claim for finality only within that context.

(iv) A processive understanding of the work of Christ will not be in juridical language which again is past oriented and as such takes only one aspect of human experience. Nor would it describe the human appropriation of Christ's significance in "transactional" terms. For such an understanding isolates God's activity in Christ from his work in the whole of reality, in creation and in and through other religious traditions. The shape of the alternative in terms of a processive ontology is well described in the following words of Chenchiah:

I want to emphasise that we can never get to the heart of Christianity by way of a juridical theology. (Here he clearly has Barth in mind for the whole section is a protest against Barthianism.) It is the *genetic* or *creative* aspects of Jesus; it is the Holy Spirit as a creative energy that takes the Indian into the new given—in Jesus.<sup>29</sup>

If the Christian claim for the decisiveness of Christ is to be meaningful primarily in a religiously non-Christian context then we need to conceive of his significance in terms of an organic-processive model. We have to state that "Christianity is not primarily a doctrine of salvation but the announcement of the

<sup>29</sup> Thangaswamy, *op. cit.*, pp. 92-93.

advent of a new creative order in Jesus. This is our thrilling discovery imparted to mankind.”<sup>30</sup>

A paradigmatic event is one that

occurs within a continuing process of events, provides illumination of what has gone before, speaks to us now with a special impressiveness, and offers new ways of understanding what is happening in consequent history.<sup>31</sup>

Such an event can never be seen in itself even though it is rooted in concrete history. It can never be understood in isolation from a whole range of events. Yet within the historical continuum of the whole of our experience, it is this event that offers the decisive clue for all of life. It possesses “a compelling quality that demands our attention and response.” Is it not what we want to affirm when we speak of the finality of Christ? This we can continue to do, in the context of religious pluralism; and only in terms of such a definition can any dialogue with believers of other religious traditions ever be possible.

The uniqueness of the Christ-event in the context of religious pluralism is then a “uniqueness of inclusion.” “He includes, not excludes, all that is truly human; he defines, but does not confine, the ceaseless working of God,”<sup>32</sup> within the dynamic historical continuum of human religious history which includes all religious traditions and communities of faith.

In summing up, we affirm that Jesus is the Christ for he functions within the Christian tradition as the decisive, life-orienting, life-transforming paradigm. We can continue to affirm this, discovering further and further the richness of the paradigm only as we participate in life in dialogue with men and women of other faiths.

<sup>30</sup> Boyd, *op. cit.*, p. 154.

<sup>31</sup> Pittenger, *op. cit.*, p. 26.

<sup>32</sup> C. F. D. Moule, cited in Pittenger, “Incarnation and Process Theology,” *Review and Expositor* LXXI (Winter, 1974), p. 55.