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Claiming Jesus as Savior in a Religiously Plural World

Gabriel Fackre

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The timing of the CTRF call for papers on “Jesus, Savior of the World” in the months following 9/11 invites some speculation. Is that definite article in the title, Jesus Savior of *the* world—not just “a world,” or “my world”—a response to an interfaith issue posed by the events of that day? A question raised about the rush to generic prayer by many Christians who fear the religious antagonisms that the attack on the Twin Towers might generate? No offense given to fellow mourners, Muslim, Jewish or otherwise as would be the case if we interceded “in Jesus’ name”? No talk of “the scandal of particularity,” following the advice of *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman who asks, “Can Islam, Christianity and Judaism know that God speaks Arabic on Fridays, Hebrew on Saturdays and Latin on Sundays?”¹ If poll results are to be believed, the 2002 *U.S. News/PBS Religion & Ethics Newsweekly* findings confirm this confidence in an indulgent and multilingual deity.² Widespread is a “plural shock” that makes for christological heart failure.

A comment in passing on the irony entailed in this current relativist orthodoxy: Christians whose interfaith sympathies prompt generic prayer, or alternately, hold that God gives equal linguistic time to these three Near Eastern faiths, actually demean the other religions they are seeking to honor. By disallowing particularity, we deny to them the universal epistemological and soteriological claims that make them what they are.³ Generosity to the religious “other” has to do with how we make such claims, not foregoing them, speaking the truth in love not hate, with a commensurate listening to the prayers and testimonies of alternate faiths.

I share a commitment to that well-chosen “the” of John 4:42⁴—Jesus Christ, “*the* Savior of *the* world”⁵—for all, not the “for me” or “for us” of today’s modernisms and postmodernisms. Here

¹ Thomas L. Friedman, “The Real War,” *New York Times*, 27 November 2001.

² Detailed in Jeffrey Shetler, “Faith in America,” *U.S. News and World Report* 132, 14 (May 2002): 40–49.

³ As in S. Mark Heim’s insightful critique of a pluralist threesome, Wilfred Cantwell Smith, John Hick, and Paul Knitter in *Salvations: Truth and Difference in Religion* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1995), 13–126.

⁴ The biblical citations throughout are from the *New Revised Standard Version*.

⁵ The issue of “the” was noted by Al Krass in earlier debates on religious pluralism, as in his comment, “In the minds of the early Christians there was no doubt but that *their* Lord was *the* Lord,” from “Accounting for the Hope that is in Me,” in *Christian Faith in a Religiously Plural World*, ed. Donald G. Dawe and John B. Carman (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1978), 158. See also Russell F. Aldwinkle, *Jesus—A Savior or The Savior?* (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 1982). Diane Eck’s recent work, *A New Religious America: How a Christian Country Has Now Become the*

is a universal truth claim for Christ's scandalous particularity.⁶ But Jesus, the savior of the world from what? The answer can be found in another Johannine text, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6). This encompassing verse is the declaration that Jesus is the *way/hodos/path* that God makes into the world to save us from sin, thereby bringing *reconciliation* with God; to rescue us from error, bringing the *truth* of the knowledge of God, *revelation*; to deliver us from death, bringing *life* with God in all its aspects, *redemption*.⁷ Of such is the work of the Savior, the last two derivative from the first, following theologically the exegetical role in the text of *aletheia* and *zoe* vis-à-vis the primary predicate, *hodos*.⁸

What of this threefold claim in the midst of today's religiously plural world? It provides us with an illuminating framework for interpreting a range of perspectives in the current theological debate. Each, in its own fashion, takes a position on how Jesus Christ is reconciler, revealer and redeemer: where the reconciling *deed* is done, where *disclosure* of the same is made, where *deliverance* happens. The diversity of views goes well beyond the familiar but inadequate typology of exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism. After a thumbnail sketch of each, with documentation in the endnotes, I shall develop the last one, a "narrative" view of the Person and Work of Christ. In what follows, the use of taxonomy, a chart, pictorials, alliteration, metaphor and the master metaphor, story, reflect my long-time effort in "pastoral systematics," striving to make the complexities of the discipline accessible to working clergy.⁹

World's Most Religiously Diverse Nation (San Francisco: Harper, 2001) is an argument for removing the "the," indeed, from all the claims of the Johannine text to be discussed. Her evidence for the extensiveness of the change in the new America in terms of the number of adherents of other religions is directly challenged by the recent detailed study by Tom W. Smith, "Religious Diversity in America: The Emergence of Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus and Others," National Opinion Research Center, University of Chicago, available online. Generalizing from a multitude of recent surveys and studies, Smith concludes, "This indicates that non-Judaic-Christian religions are much smaller than frequently cited high-end estimates and have hardly transformed the religious landscape as much as often portrayed.... Non-Judeo-Christian religions make up a small, but growing share of America's religious mosaic. In 1973–1980 the General Social Survey (GSS) indicated that they accounted for 0.8% of the adult population. This grew to 1.3% in 1981–1990 and 2.6% in 1990–2000.... The Muslim population is commonly overestimated by a factor of 3–4.... Impressive as the actual changes in non-traditional religions have been, they can not match these and many related claims about the growth and size of these religions" (5, 1, 4).

⁶ Kathryn Tanner notes the transformation in contemporary theology of Luther's *pro me* from its focus on "a dimension of the reality of Christ's working" to the "modern penchant for making questions of human subjectivity paramount"; see Tanner, "Jesus Christ," in *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Doctrine*, ed. Colin Gunton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 253, 264. In the case being here considered, the subjectivity is given a postmodern turn expressed in its pop phrase, "it works for me" (while something very different may "work for you").

⁷ The distinction between "reconciliation" and "redemption" follows, roughly, that made by Barth in his *Church Dogmatics*. A detailed exegesis of this verse is found in Fackre, *The Christian Story*, Vol. 2, *Scripture in the Church for the World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 254–341.

⁸ The case made by Raymond Brown and others. See *The Christian Story*, 2:262.

⁹ A chart accompanies the presentation.

A Range of Current Views¹⁰

Pluralist Perspectives

The first five views are “pluralist” in that they put to the fore a commonality shared by Christ with other religions.

View 1: Common Core. At the center of all the great religions of humankind is found a common core of divine (however conceived) doing, disclosing and delivering. Each faith approaches it through its own heroes, expresses it in its own language, celebrates it in its own rituals, formulates it in its own rules of behavior, and passes it on in its own communal forms. While the rhetoric of each religion may claim that its way, truth and life are for all, these absolutist professions are, in fact, “love talk,” the metaphors of commitment, not the metaphysics of reality. Jesus is, therefore, “*my* savior,” not “*the* savior.” In pop idiom, “you do your thing and I’ll do mine.” Christian faith and other religions are different routes to the same core Reality. Often added as a test of validity is the norm of ethical fruitfulness, judged to be universal. Thus a “C” is assigned to each of the three claims in the accompanying chart.¹¹

View 2: Common Quest. Perspective 2 makes no claim for a reachable core, as perspective 1 does. Postmodern ambiguity rather than modern foundational certainty is the order of the day. Religions are quests for self-understanding, not paths to Reality. Like the relativism of the common core view, this too is describable in popular idiom as “different strokes for different folks.” Unlike it, View 2 judges that the common quest provides no way to an ultimate truth and life. Rather, “my savior” is the profession and practice of “what works for me” in the midst of my day-to-day penultimacies, a pragmatic test in a postmodern world for what is self-referentially adequate. Thus all the “Cs” are followed by question marks.¹²

View 3: Common Pool. Like its predecessors, View 3 gives pride of place to religious

¹⁰ This more complex spectrum of views began with an early sifting and sorting in “The Scandals of Particularity and Universality” *Midstream* 22, 1 (Jan. 1983): 32–52, and runs to a recent version in “Christ and Religious Pluralism: the Current Debate,” *Pro Ecclesia* 7, R (Fall 1998): 389–395.

¹¹ The “love talk” characterization is that of Krister Stendahl from “Notes from Three Biblical Studies,” in *Christ’s Lordship and Religious Pluralism*, ed. Gerald H. Anderson and Thomas F. Stransky (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1981), 13–15. A terse formulation of the core as the “pattern of the new being encoded ‘in the name of Jesus’ for Christians, but in other names for other religions” appears in the Dawe essay, “Christian Faith in a Religiously Plural World,” in *Christian Faith in a Religiously Plural World*, ed. Donald G. Dawe and John B. Carman (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1978), 13–33. John Hick, Wilfred Cantwell Smith, and Paul Knitter probably are the best known 20th century exponents of this view. For others expressing it in one form or another, see John Hick and Paul Knitter, eds., *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1987).

¹² See Richard Rorty, *Objectivism, Relativism and Truth. Philosophical Papers*, Vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991) for the philosophical underpinnings of this view.

commonalities, but seeks to respect the uniqueness of a religion and not dissolve it into a common core, contra View 1, and insists that such is in touch with Reality, not just involved in a quest for it as in View 2. It does this by maintaining that each is its own distinct reconciling way to ultimate Reality, disclosing some needed aspect of ultimate truth, delivering its devotees to saving life through its own means. The way of Christ grants to Christians access to Reality, offers a distinct illuminating take on the truth, and delivers ultimate life through its unique portal. The challenge is to pool the best from each with the goal of a “world faith.” Thus a “C” is assigned to each, but an add-on revelatory “P” of particularity in revelation, recognizing the contribution Christ makes to a fuller disclosure.¹³

View 4: Common Community. Challenging the individualism of the foregoing options, the common community view sees us as creatures of formative cultures. Our communal destiny is normative for us as well as descriptive of us, a call to know who we are, and live out of the traditions in which we are immersed. For Christians, this means clarity about our defining characteristics, knowing our ecclesial language and lore and respecting our community’s rules of believing and behaving. Christ can be no other than the way, truth and life *for us*. Given our postmodern circumstances, we can lay no claim to reaching ultimate reality through our way, or assert such to be true and saving for everyone. Hence, Christians are to “keep the faith,” but acknowledge that they share with others the common condition of ambiguity, with a question mark placed after each PC.¹⁴

View 5: Common Range. The fifth perspective shares the pluralist premise of the former options. The religions are on common ground in matters of way, truth and life, all providing reconciliation, revelation and redemption. However, when it comes to disclosure of the Really Real—accessible here too, as in Views 1 and 3—Jesus’ light is the brightest and best. To change the figure, Jesus is on the same mountain range as Mohammad, Buddha, Moses—or for that matter other great prophets from Socrates to Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr.—but is the Mt. Everest among the peaks of human experience. The difference is in degree, not kind, for Christ offers the same saving benefits as other high religions. A higher degree of truth is signified by placing a P before the C of the revelatory category.¹⁵

¹³ Although John Hick’s writings can be associated with variations on View 1, his argument in *Death and Eternal Life* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976) falls into this category. Gavin D’Costa has traced Hick’s developing point(s) of view in *John Hick’s Theology of Religions* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1987).

¹⁴ Another “narrative” view, associated with Hans Frei and George Lindbeck and a notable company of their students, is regularly under discussion as in the critique by I. M. Wallace, “The New Yale Theology,” *Christian Scholars Review* 17, 2 (Dec. 1987): 154–170. However, Bruce Marshall has shown that Lindbeck’s communal narrativity does include a claim of “correspondence to the real order”; Marshall, “Aquinas as Postliberal Theologian,” *The Thomist* 53, 3 (July 1989): 353–402. For the struggle of postliberal theologians to come clear on this issue, see Garrett Green, ed., *Scriptural Authority and Narrative Interpretation* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987).

¹⁵ See W. Norman Pittinger’s oft-referenced development of degree Christology in *The Word Incarnate* (New York:

Particularist Perspectives

The next five views declare for the definitive singularity of the deed God does in Jesus Christ to reconcile the world. How that impacts disclosure and deliverance distinguishes the perspectives from one another.

View 6: Anonymous Particularity. Only at one point in human history does God come among us to do the necessary deed of reconciliation. Jesus is *the* “absolute savior” not *a* relative one, the singular incarnate Word, reconciler of God and the world. However, this particularity has a universal scope. The power from the christological center of history radiates everywhere in incognito fashion, giving all humans and their diverse religious traditions a sense, to one degree or another, of the divine purposes, the option of responding aright and the offer of grace to do so. With that right response, they become “anonymous Christians.” While so granting the universal possibilities of both revelation and redemption, only in the privileged church of Christians is there the clear knowledge of the divine and assurance of the path to salvation¹⁶—thus, a “P” for reconciliation, a PC for revelation, and a PC for redemption.

View 7: Revelatory Particularity. God comes to reconcile the alienated world in only one way, and gives ultimate truth only in one place, in Jesus Christ. This divine deed is so radical that all human beings are reconciled to God in this central Event, dying with Christ in his humiliation and rising with him in his exaltation. The church is uniquely given the revelation of this truth, and called to get the message out to the human race of “virtual believers” so reconciled. Are all then finally redeemed by the reconciling way of God in Christ? We have a right to *hope* that is so based on the deed done, but not to assert a universal homecoming as an article of faith. Only the sovereign God decides the final outcome. Hence a solitary P appears at both way and truth and a C? at life.¹⁷

View 8: Pluralist Particularity. Christ is the defining particular way that God makes into the world, giving a unique truth and special saving life. Yet the generosity of God provides in

Harper and Brothers, 1959) and his later development of this view vis a vis the specifics of religious pluralism in “Can a Christian be a Buddhist Too?” and “Can a Buddhist be a Christian Too?” *Japanese Religions* 11, 2 and 3 (Sept. 1980): 35–55.

¹⁶ Expounded in Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, Vol. 17, trans. Margaret Kohl (New York: Crossroads 1981), 24–50 and his *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity*, trans. William V. Dych (New York: Seabury, 1978), 138–321. A variation on this theme is developed in evangelical idiom by John Sanders in the sections of John Sanders, ed. *What About Those Who Have Never Heard? Three Views on the Destiny of the Unevangelized* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1995).

¹⁷ Karl Barth’s *Church Dogmatics*, Vols. 4/1–4 is the most detailed outworking of this view, with *apokatastasis* as an “article of hope” described in *Church Dogmatics*, Vol. 4/3/1, trans. G. W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1961), 477–478. Whether Barth departs significantly from his revelatory exclusivity with his discussion of “free communications” and “parables of the Kingdom” in *Church Dogmatics* 4/3/1 is a matter of continued debate. For a discussion of this see my *The Doctrine of Revelation: A Narrative Interpretation of Revelation*, *Edinburgh Studies in Constructive Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 136–137, 143–145.

different religions other ways, truths and aspects of ultimate life (“religious fulfillments” in conformity with their desires). Christians believe that the one to which they testify is the supreme deed, disclosure and deliverance of the triune God, inclusive of the partial goals of other religions, and seek to witness that superiority to all. A primary P is placed under the way alongside a secondary C, and similarly ordered PCs under truth and life.¹⁸

View 9: Imperial Particularity. Christ is the particular way God came into the world to bring the only truth and only saving life to be had. The elect and/or those who decide for Christ during their time on earth, know the truth and are saved. Those passed over and/or do not decide for Christ perish eternally. Christians are charged to preach the gospel so that those called may respond in saving faith. Therefore a singular P as deed, a primal P under truth with a C that recognizes non-salvific general revelation and a solitary P under deliverance.¹⁹

*View 10: Narrative Particularity.*²⁰ A narrative is “an account of characters and events in a plot moving over time and space through conflict toward resolution.”²¹ The defining deed, disclosure and deliverance take place in the central chapter of a Grand Narrative that runs from creation to consummation. But as the Story of God, the chapters that lead up to and away from the Center play their role in the plot of reconciliation, revelation and redemption, as reflected in a P for way, a PC for truth and a PC? for life. To that centerpoint we turn, the Person and Work of Jesus Christ, situating its exposition narratively, with a quick comparison at appropriate points of the views just canvassed.

Narrative Particularity: The Person and Work of Christ

Locating who Christ is (the Person) and what Christ does (the Work) in the setting of the biblical macrostory provides a framework for grappling with the concerns of the pluralist options

¹⁸ A view given prominence initially by Joseph DiNoia in “The Universality of Salvation and the Diversity of Religious Aims,” *World Mission* (Winter 1981–1982): 4–15, but developed in detail by S. Mark Heim in his two works, *Salvations*, op. cit., and *The Depth of the Riches: A Trinitarian Theology of Religious Ends* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001).

¹⁹ With a qualification here and there, but substantially a detailed exposition of the imperial views is Ronald H. Nash, *Is Jesus the Only Savior?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), and his sections in Sanders, ed., *What About Those Who Have Never Heard?*

²⁰ The postmodern veto of metanarratives of the sort to be discussed is rejected for these reasons: 1) Postmodernity as an intellectual construct is itself a metanarrative. What is sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander. 2) The imperiousness and violence attributed to metanarratives depend on the contents of same, not their character as cosmic story. Postmodern ideology has its own history of imperialism when it achieves power, as in sections of academia. J. Richardson Middleton and Brian J. Walsh, *Truth is Stranger Than it Used to Be: Biblical Faith in a Postmodern Age* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1995), 75–79 and *passim* take up some of these matters.

²¹ Gabriel Fackre, “Narrative Theology: An Overview,” *Interpretation* 37, 4 (Oct. 1983): 341.

without eroding the scandalous particularity of John 14:6. Jesus Christ is *the* Savior of *the* world. At the same time, the Story requires both a width and length to the divine mercy that makes for a “generous orthodoxy” in a religiously plural world.

The Christian story begins with a prologue, the eternal being of the tripersonal God. The loving life together of Father, Son and Holy Spirit—the immanent Trinity—sets the stage for a journey toward a comparable end *ad extra*, the unfolding of the plan and plot of the economic Trinity. Stated in terms of its background portrayal, the drama happens in the Grand Narrative of Scripture, from creation to consummation. In that Story, who God is is disclosed by what God does.²² With regard to the Person of Christ, the tale told in the Johannine language of Theophilus of Antioch is illuminating. It begins with indwelling Word of the divine Life Together, the *Logos endiathetos*.²³

Reflecting the divine being and purpose, God wills the coming to be of a covenant partner, the outgoing work of the *Logos prophorikos*, sourced by the Father and empowered by the Spirit. Thus, Chapter 1 of the Story: the world is brought out of nothing into created being for a life together with God, and with itself. Within creation, the creature with the human face is in special relationship and responsibility to God (Gen. 1:26, 2:15–17), called and capacitated (the double meaning of the *imago Dei*²⁴) to respond in kind to God’s loving reach (so God and Adam as portrayed on the ceiling of the Sistine chapel). The invitation to life together with the Creator includes a comparable outreach to one another (Gen. 1:27, 2:18) and to creation. Thus the charge: “Adam, trust and serve God,” do not “play God” (Gen. 3:5). Except for the ministry of angels, whatever an atom, an animal, or other created beings are given and called to be, as in Barth’s wise agnosticism, we can only guess.²⁵

²² Gabriel Fackre, *The Christian Story*, Vol. 1, *A Narrative Interpretation of Basic Christian Doctrine*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 245–246.

²³ See Theophilus of Antioch, *Ad Autolyicum*, 2, for the journey of the *Logos* to be tracked here. William Placher notes, however, that “‘Wisdom’...has some claim to be the earliest term Christians used for the relation of Jesus Christ to the one he called ‘Father’” and that “in a number of texts from shortly before the time of Jesus, ‘Word’ and ‘Wisdom’ are used more or less interchangeably,” in *Jesus the Savior: The Meaning of Jesus Christ for Christian Faith* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 22, 25. Given the feminine gender of Wisdom and thus its deconstruction of a too simple masculine characterization of the triune God, and the precedent of interchangeability with Word, there is no reason to deny the journey of the second Person as describable also as that made by Wisdom. It may have special resonance when considering the work of common grace. For a review of the feminist literature that proposes *sophia* as an alternate to *logos*, see Kathryn Greene-McCreight, *Feminist Reconstructions of Christian Doctrine: Narrative Analysis and Appraisal* (New York: Oxford, 200), 92–101. For all that, we honor the insight of Theophilus by using his own language.

²⁴ Fackre, *The Christian Story*, 1:68–71.

²⁵ On the modesty counseled, see Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 3/2, ed. and trans. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1960), 78, 374, 395, 521. On the ministry of angels, see my “Angels Heard and Demons Seen,” *Theology Today* 51, 3 (Oct. 1994): 345–358, much in debt, again, to Barth.

As the story unfolds, what God wills for us and what we will toward God go on collision course. So comes “sin,” the self’s idolatrous curve inward (Luther) rather than outward toward God, the human other and creation itself. The result is a life self-sufficiently *alone*, not a life together (Gen. 3:6–13). Chapter 2 is about the stumble and fall of the world, our alienation from God and its derivative estrangements from neighbor and nature (Gen. 3:14–24). Thus the Christian problematic of sin: our breach of the intended relationship between God and the world and the loss of its accompanying light and life. To turn the world around requires a saving way of reconciliation with God and its derivative revelation and redemption.

The purposes of God are stronger than our perverse powers—so chapter 3 in the Story, the renewal of our Maker’s bonding with the world. Its first phase is the covenant with Noah, the pledge of the long-suffering Creator to stay with creation even in its rebel state, signaled by the rainbow promise of divine perseverance (Gen. 9:12).²⁶ Sealing the promise is the giving of sufficient light and power to keep the Grand Narrative going forward.²⁷ Christologically viewed, this is the sustaining largesse of the *Logos spermatikos* with a variety of gifts to know and do things that are true, good, beautiful and holy, a “common grace” that discloses something of the path ahead and delivers its receivers from impediments on that journey (Gen. 9:1–7, 14:18–20; Heb. 7:1–17).²⁸ Amidst the distorting effects of the fall on our efforts to pursue that goal, genuine evidences of this preserving Word are manifest wherever truth enlightens and life is made livable. To anticipate, why would this universal grace not be at work in many and diverse ways within the world religions?

Chapter 3, Part II in the narrative can be pictorially described as an end point of the rainbow that settles among a particular people. God makes a special covenant of grace with Abraham, whose graced faith makes him “father of all us all” (Rom. 4:17). This singular covenant includes its Mosaic form of the light of law and its Exodus deliverance of life for the chosen people, embodying the ministries of prophets, priests and kings, and the dream of a *shalom* to be. In Pauline retrospect, this people with its special graces of revelatory disclosure as well as covenantal deed and deliverance participates proleptically in the central scandal of particularity to come,

²⁶ See David Novak, *Image of the Non-Jew in Judaism: An Historical and Constructive Study of the Noahide Laws* (Mellen, 1984). C. H. Dodd’s durable study of “the Noachian covenant” is in “Natural Law and the Bible,” *Theology* (May/June 1946), reprint. A recent review of Reformation thought on the natural law aspects of the Noachic covenant vis-à-vis aspects of the theology of Thomas Hooker is found in the monograph by W. J. Torrance Kirby, *The Theology of Richard Hooker in the Context of the Magisterial Reformation*, Studies in Reformed History and Theology New Series 5 (Princeton: Princeton Theological Seminary, 2000). For an extended discussion of covenant with Noah as it relates to contemporary theologies, see Fackre, *The Doctrine of Revelation*, 61–102.

²⁷ Anticipated in the time between the fall and Noachic covenant by the sustenance of the world to that point, interpretable as the broken but not destroyed *imago*, now confirmed and extended to the End by the covenant with Noah.

²⁸ For an interesting discussion of “common grace” and the “Melchizedek factor,” see Gordon Spykman, *Reformational Theology: A New Paradigm for Doing Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 320–321, 424–427.

warranting an anti-supersessionist understanding of the place of the Jewish people in Christian faith.²⁹ Indeed the opened book of this people gives us the story we are telling, pointing, again in Christian retrospect, toward chapters yet to be.

In one Jew, a Galilean carpenter, the rainbow end becomes an intersection, a cruciform representation of the doctrine of the Person and Work of Christ: *incarnation* as the deep drive of God into our world, and *atonement*—at-one-ment—as the bringing together of the alienated parties to God’s purposes.

Incarnation

A narrative interpretation of the Incarnation, as given in the patristic formulation of the journey we are following, points to the *Logos ensarkos*, the enfleshed Word. Theophilus’ trajectory throughout is based on the prologue of John’s narrativity with the metaphors of “light” and “life” we have borrowed from its account. Thus, “in the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God...All things came into being through him...in him was life and the life was the light of all people...and the Word became flesh and lived among us...” Missing often in traditional and even credal accounts is the Story’s chapter on Israel (as in the prologue’s references to Moses and the prophet John),³⁰ but otherwise, the path of the *Logos* is that traversed in the Story we are here following. Its contribution to a narrative interpretation of the Person of Christ is its trinitarian refinement of the who of the incarnation. Not the Father, not the Spirit, but the Son becomes flesh. The intersection of God with the world is the Word incarnate, For all that particularity, the Word is the Word of the Father, enfleshed by the power of the Spirit, and thus, the issue of the Father of the Son by the Holy Spirit.³¹

By the divine action, Jesus Christ is “true God from true God...incarnate from the Virgin Mary” (Nicene Creed). The second Person of the Trinity “became” Jesus of Nazareth (John 1: 14). No qualified or compromised entry of deity here.³² With the multiple meanings of *logos* in the ancient world in mind, we can say the eternal word, purpose, plan, reason, vision...came to dwell among us. The divine Intention for creation’s “life together,” the Word of the Life Together

²⁹ For commentary on the state of the question see Fackre, “A Symposium on *Dabru Emet*. A Jewish Statement on Christians and Christianity,” *Pro Ecclesia* 11, 1 (Winter 2002): 5–19. For a review of current supersessionist and anti-supersessionist views, see Fackre, “The Place of Israel in Christian Faith,” in *Gott lieben und seine Gebote halten*, In memoriam Klaus Bochmuehl, Herausgegeben von Markus Bochmuehl und Helmut Burkhardt (Basel: Brunnen Verlag Giessen, 1991), 21–38.

³⁰ The chapter missing in too much traditional Christian teaching has contributed to the terrible legacy of anti-Judaism. Interesting, however, Theophilus did see the *Logos* at work in the Old Testament theophanies.

³¹ A formulation (Moltmann) that attempts to maintain the christological accent of the West, but recognize the parity of the Persons more clearly stated by the East’s single procession.

³² Contra the Ebionisms, Adoptionisms, Arianisms, and Nestorianisms of the christological controversies.

of the triune God, lived and breathed in this Nazarene. His words and deeds embodied the *agape* and *shalom* that God is and wills. Nothing less than God among us can deal with the alienations to which we are heir.

As important as the divine initiative, no less consequential is the reality of the “among” us and “became” one of us. No illusory flesh here diminished or dissolved by deity, as the church’s credos and definitions of the first four centuries of christological debate were at pains to assert.³³ The Word-in-the-flesh meant God taking on our finitude: in matters of the mind not being a “know-it-all” but rather learning to “grow in wisdom”; in matters of the body, urinating and defecating, sweating in a carpenter shop and bleeding on a cross; in matters of the soul, wrestling with doubt on that same tree. The Person of Christ is truly human as well as truly God, yet truly one, “without confusion, without change, without division, without separation.”³⁴

When lodged in a narrative framework these standard assertions of classical Christian faith have implications for our spectrum of options on the issues of religious pluralism. For one, the narrative reading is placed among the particularist views regarding the first rubric, “way.” As the once-happened incarnate Word, Jesus Christ is the singular way God makes into our world to reconcile it to its Creator. Here is the decisive turning point in the Story, God among us first-hand.

The Word made flesh, however, is no bolt from the blue. The *Logos* is the architect of creation. The Word that “was God...was in the beginning with God [and] all things came into being through him” (John 1:1, 2, 3). The same Word, after the fall, graces the world with Noah’s rainbow. Wherever creation displays marks of its Creator, visible by the preserving light and power of common grace, the second Person of the Trinity is the mediator of that disclosure. Wherever truth is known or life made livable, the hidden Christ is present. This is a Work of the Person, a matter to be developed in the section on the Atonement.

The rainbow of universality, however, touches down at a point of particularity. Two-thirds of Christian Scripture witness to the special graces of disclosure and deliverance given to a chosen people. Who Christ is and what Christ does cannot be understood or come to be without this trajectory toward the Story’s center, recorded in the Hebrew Scripture within the Christian Bible. Paul’s declaration of Abraham as the “father” of faith, and his assertion that “the gifts and the calling” given to this people are irrevocable, place the Jewish people in unique relation to God’s saving purposes (Rom. 4:16, 11:29).³⁵ The final soteriological implications will be taken up below.

The accomplishment of the purposes of God happens when the rainbow arc is driven deep at the particular point of one Jew. What is done in this enfleshment of the Word is the Work of Christ, the reconciliation of the alienated parties to the divine purposes.

³³ Contra the Docetisms, Modalisms, Apollinarianisms, and Monophysitisms of the same controversies.

³⁴ Formula of Chalcedon.

³⁵ See Fackre, *Gott lieben un seine Gebote halten*.

Atonement

The Work of the Person is to transform the condition of the world from separation to communion. The central chapter of the Christian story tells us that the at-one-ing charge from the Father to the Son by the Holy Spirit is carried out in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. From Bethlehem's Person comes the Work of Galilee, Calvary and Easter morning. This micro-narrative, set within the context of the macro-narrative we have been tracing, is our framework for interpreting the doctrine of the atonement. That is, traditional concepts associated with the doctrine, such as the threefold office of Christ, redemption accomplished and applied, the finished and continuing Work of Christ, etc., are construed narratively, providing the perspective on the issues of religious pluralism framed by John 14:6.

The Threefold Office of Christ

The *munus triplex*, developed in detail by John Calvin but also in wide ecumenical usage,³⁶ provides a framework for interpreting the Jesus story, as it bears on the claims of reconciliation, revelation and redemption.

The Prophetic Office. The life of the prophet Jesus discloses who God is. His Galilean ministry is a demonstration of the *Agape/Shalom* of God. His being, his relationship to others, to creation and to the Father, his healings, his preaching and teaching concerning the yet/not yet reign of God, all bespeak and embody the Life Together that God is.

Prophecy is "forth-telling" the word about God encompassing the "foretelling" of the outcome of the purposes of God in the kingdom to come. As such, the knowledge of the fulness of who God is and what God wills, hidden from view in a fallen world, is revealed in the prophetic ministry of Jesus who as the Word enfleshed makes that ultimate disclosure. The first office, correlated narratively with the Galilean ministry, is the *revelation* of ultimate truth about God and the Kingdom of God, obscured elsewhere by the pervasive error of sin (more than the ignorance of finitude) that damages (but does not destroy) our *imago Dei*, making available the rudiments by a preserving grace. Only at the revelatory Center is to be found the fundamentals, the fullness of "truth" in the prophetic office.³⁷

The radical nature of the fall is such that the world is enraged by the presence in its midst of a loving Word over against all that the world is in its hates and hurts. Evoking that wrath, absolute

³⁶ From John Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Vol. 1, trans. Henry Beveridge, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957), Book II. Chapter XV, 425–432 to the Second Vatican Council's "Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity," in *Documents of Vatican II*, ed. Walter Abbott, SJ (New York: Guild Press, 1966), 491 and *passim*.

³⁷ The 3 offices are themselves a "life together" reflecting their trinitarian origins. Hence, the priestly and royal ministries of Christ also participate in the prophetic office, and vice versa, even as each has its distinctive role. See Fackre, *The Christian Story*, 1:149–150.

love as “burning coals” (Rom. 12:20), the prophetic office *exposes* the depth of human sin as well *discloses* the heights of the divine *Agape*. The life of the prophet ends in crucifixion. Yet the cross opens a new sub-chapter in the Jesus story. With it comes the priestly ministry.

The Priestly Office. A priest sacrifices for sin. Jesus, our high priest, sacrifices for the sin of the world. This priest is like no other for he is the victim that he, the priest, lays on the altar. And, like no finite other, as God enfleshed on that altar, the victim-priest has an infinite capacity to confront and overcome the infinite magnitude of the world’s sin. The Person of Christ takes into the divine being the full measure of judgment we are due, and thus “the cross in the heart of God” (Charles Dinsmore), the godly Mercy that overcomes the divine Wrath (Luther), the crucified God (Moltmann).³⁸ No God “up there” exacting punishment on Jesus “down here,” as in pop piety or child abuse ideology,³⁹ but the crucified Deity who takes away the sin of the world. Thus the Johannine assertion that Jesus is “*the way*” that God, the Son, makes toward us in order to overcome sin and reconcile the world.

We linger a bit longer at this central office in wonder at what happened on the cross to turn the world around. Can a story Jesus tells shed light on the narrative of his own death? The tale of the running father and the returning son hints strongly of what was to come (Luke 15:11–24). Where did the expected Semitic punishment of an ungrateful offspring go? Where else but into the father’s own heart? There acceptance absorbed anger in a suffering love that made for a spurt forward to greet the wayward offspring. And the parental run was on while the son was “far off,” an unconditional (*agape*) welcome, innocent of the whys and wherefores of the returner.

How can we not have here a portent the divine mercy that on the cross takes into itself the divine judgment against sin? A Word that God’s suffering Love welcomes those who return in the faith that a sinner can be received? A trust in a spontaneous and unconditional *Agape*? The tenth view of the saving Work of Christ turns to story to express God’s own Story. And this small tale also illustrates the interpenetration of the offices of Christ, for the priestly and royal ministries are required to illuminate the latter, and the latter to interpret the former.

The Royal Office. The accomplishment of the Work of Christ requires confrontation with the “last enemy,” death. Death is mortality and more, including as it does all the sin, evil and suffering that militate against life. Easter morning announces the defeat of that final foe. The resurrection confirms the victory of the victim’s sacrifice and gives assurance of the things hoped for, the world’s future healing.

Regents rule their terrain. The resurrection announces that the kingdom will have its ruler, the divine-human Person. Christ the risen king is the surety that reconciliation has come to be

³⁸ In addition to the well known work by Jurgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, trans. R. A. Wilson and John Bowden (London: SCM Press, 1974), see also Richard Bauckham, *God Crucified: Monotheism & Christology in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999; Cumbria: Paternoster, 1998).

³⁹ Cf. Placher, *Jesus the Savior*, 112–113.

and that redemption, as the “application” of its “benefits” by the Holy Spirit is assured. Christ is the deed that delivers as well as discloses. Thus the Johannine assertion that Christ is the defining “life” as well as the way and the truth.

The threefold office makes possible a full-orbed understanding of the Work of Christ as portrayed in the biblical account of this central chapter. It is an ecumenical formula that challenges the reductionisms that tend to be embodied in historic traditions, ones that focus exclusively on the prophetic Jesus who saves from error/ignorance, the priestly Jesus who saves from sin, and the royal Jesus who saves from death.

The Continuing Work

The Work of Christ as revelation, reconciliation and redemption is accomplished in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. For the Grand Narrative to move toward its conclusion, the world must share in the consequences of the deed done. The “finished work” requires a “continuing work”; atonement accomplished moves to atonement applied. The ascension of Jesus Christ to the right hand of the Father extends the royal reign, stretching it toward the finale when Christ “hands over” his rule to the Father (1 Cor. 15:24).

The ascended Christ continues all three ministries in the time between the times of Easter and Eschaton. Wherever the fruits of reconciliation—revelation and redemption—are given, Christ is present and active. Their central locale is described in the story of Pentecost.

On that Day, the ascent of Christ manifests itself by the descent of the Spirit, the light of the risen Sun bursting toward us in tongues of fire settling upon disciples that, so graced, become apostles (Acts 2:1–4). The gift of *kerygma* given by Christ the prophet opens the mouth of Peter to tell the Story (Acts 2:15–36). The charism of *leitourgia* given by Christ the priest empowers the community to celebrate the Story in baptizing and breaking bread (Acts 2:41–42). So the church’s means of grace—Word and sacrament—for disclosing the final truth of the reconciling deed of God in Christ, and offering ultimate life-giving deliverance to those who receive the Word audible and visible through justifying faith.

The gifts of *koinonia* and *diakonia* join *kerygma* and *leitourgia* in the continuing work of the in-Spirited Son of the Father (Acts 2:42, 44). As the sanctifying power of love that mirrors the Life Together of both God’s being and doing, the life together of the Christian community and its service to the neighbor in need are charisms of the kingship of Christ that defeat death-dealing powers.

The continuing prophetic, priestly and royal work of Christ ranges over the world beyond the borders of church. Wherever any truth is disclosed, any life is granted by deliverance from evil and suffering, Jesus Christ exercises his threefold office incognito (Matt. 25:31–46). The Noachic covenant is the gift of a christological common grace, as earlier noted. So the New Testament assurance that God has “not left himself without a witness in doing good...so that they would

search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him....” (Acts 14:17; 17:27). Of such is the derivative disclosure and empowerment to pursue it of the “absolute Savior.” These gifts given by the hidden Christ are the temporal truth and life generously distributed so that the Grand Narrative can go forward to its goal. Common grace does not save the world from sin. Only one incarnate and atoning Way does that. And its reception by justifying faith is the only life worth living eternally. Documenting the distinction here made is an edition of *Cruden’s Concordance* which notes the two meanings of salvation in Scripture, “deliverance from sin and its consequences,” the basic Christian problematic, as distinguished from the sense we are describing here in the grace of preservation as “preservation from trouble or danger.”⁴⁰ The Johannine “life” in its ultimate sense as *eternal* life, here and hereafter—the creed’s life *everlasting*—is the More not to be confused with the temporal life “lasting” given by common grace.⁴¹

Christ’s Noachic arc over our fallen world, with its universal grace, includes a rainbow of world religions, instruments of his preserving purposes. Within them are manifest truth that enlightens and life that empowers their adherents in the world’s journey on its way, as measured by the norm of Christ.⁴² In this respect, the narrative view is distinguished from View 7 with its denial of truth beyond the exclusive disclosure in the event of Christ and thus excision of the world’s religions from the purposes of God. “Common” grace, it should be noted, does not mean the sameness of religious truth known and done, given the variety of differing charisms available through this generous universality.⁴³ Contra View 9, “general revelation” means a rich grace at work in the truth known and life given in the world’s religions that keep the Story going forward (as well as the universality of Christ’s offer of salvation to be discussed in the consummation of the Story). On the other hand, a narrative view of the gifts of these common christological graces is tethered to the biblical Storyline and does not make the speculative leap of View 8 that takes the humanly enriching religious insights and experiences (the “horizontal” graces) into the

⁴⁰ On the various meanings of salvation in Scripture, see Aldwinkle, *Jesus—A Savior or the Savior?*, 19–85.

⁴¹ Fackre, *The Christian Story*, 1:190–207, 227–230.

⁴² As measured by Christ, and also as potentially enriching our very understanding of Christ, drawing out what is implicit in his Person and Work, as Christian faith enters new contexts shaped by diverse religious traditions. While the narrative perspective here developed differs from the point of view argued in *The Depth of the Riches* regarding the diversity of eternal religious fulfillments, based on a different judgment regarding the depth of the fall and its consequences, and the relation of the immanent to the economic Trinity, Heim, following A F. Walls and L.O. Sanneh, lays out persuasively how “translations” of the Gospel in contexts shape by other religions can enlarge the understanding of our own faith; Heim, *The Depth of the Riches*, 139–140.

⁴³ Common grace and general revelation do not require equivalency of disclosure and deliverance as might be concluded from the language of “common” and “general.” The latter refer to the universal grace at work beyond the historical particularity of Jesus Christ, and can accommodate the idea of differing dimensions of that grace present in varied religious traditions, “revealed types,” as argued by Gerald McDermott in *Can Evangelicals Learn from World Religions?* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2001), 113–119.

transhistorical “vertical” and eschatological realms as varied (albeit lesser) religious fulfillments; only a graced justifying faith can give eternal life. Nor can it raise the significance of common grace to offer anonymously the eternal deliverance claimed for such by View 6. In all cases, what measure of light and life are granted to any one world religion can only be judged by the defining disclosure at the center of the Story.⁴⁴ The wider ministries in the continuing Work of Christ are made possible by the once-happened accomplishment of atonement, the defeat of sin at the center of the Story in the life, death and resurrection of Christ.

The Consummating Work of Christ

The continuing Work is consummated by Christ, the Hound of Heaven, who pursues us beyond the gates of death and to the very End. As the whole world has been reconciled by the saving way God has made into our midst, and is given the promise of God’s universal salvific will (1 Tim. 2: 4), we have grounds for believing the Word of final truth with its offer of eternal life will be heard by all. The divine perseverance is such that Christ “descends to the dead” (Apostles Creed) and proclaims the Good News “even to the dead” (1 Pet. 4:6), those whose earthly journey has not been graced by hearing the Word.⁴⁵ This is the length to which God’s mercy will go.

In the closing chapter of the Story, Christ’s invitation becomes adjudication. “He will come again to judge the living and the dead” (Apostles’ Creed). Eschatological consummation is closure, a reminder of the gravity of choices made. Returning to our present 9/11 context, it is Christ the judge of the quick and the dead whom the suicide bombers will meet at the Great Assize, as will all of us who contributed to the circumstances that brought that day to be. Of

⁴⁴ So Barth’s helpful investigation of the same in *Church Dogmatics*, 4/3/1, 125–128. Gerald McDermott also deploys this christological norm, while giving attention to the “light” God gives to other religions, one that can even enrich the understanding of the truth in Christian faith itself, drawing out its implications; see his *Can Evangelicals Learn from Other Religions? By using the biblical distinction between the two forms of deliverance, this paper speaks of the “life” possible as well in salvation from earthly evil through non-Christian religions.*

⁴⁵ The concept of divine perseverance beyond the gates of death is carefully surveyed by John Sanders in *No Other Name: An Investigation of the Destiny of the Unevangelized* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 177–24, reviewing its appearance in early patristic thought up through 19th and 20th century theologians, both evangelical (Donald Bloesch) and ecumenical (George Lindbeck). I develop the point of view as an inheritance from the 19th century “Andover theory” in a trilogy with Ronald Nash and John Sanders; Sanders, ed., *What About Those Who Have Never Heard* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1995), 56–61, 71–94, 150–155. The New Testament evidence is hotly debated by biblical scholars. For more recent “pros” see Bo Reicke, *The Disobedient Spirits and Christian Baptism A Study of 1 Peter 3:19 and its Context* (Lund: Ejnar Munksgarrd, Kobenhavn, 1946) and Leonhardt Goppelt, *A Commentary on 1 Peter*, trans. John E Alsup, ed. Ferdinand Hahn (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), and “cons,” Paul J. Achtemeier, *1 Peter: A Commentary on 1 Peter* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), and Wayne A. Grudem, *The First Epistle of Peter: An Introduction and Commentary* (Leicester, England: InterVarsity, 1988; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988).

course, given the trajectory of the Story, as View 7 rightly maintains, we may consider the possibility of a final penitent and believing “Yes” to all who have not heard aright the Word of truth from the all-loving and all-powerful God. A universal reach of the Good News is not universalism’s assurances that all will be saved. The divine love is tough as well as tender, making such prognostications an article of hope, given the trajectory of the Story, not an article of faith. Both the divine sovereignty to decide such and the freedom granted to resist the divine invitation preclude such claims.

What of Paul’s confidence that “all Israel will be saved” (Rom. 11:26)? Such suggests a different destiny than that of people of other religions who have not heard the Word. Might it be that these heirs of Abraham, the “father” of saving faith, will learn on that final Day that the identity of the agent of their Abrahamic faith is the Person of Jesus Christ? Not unlike what faithful Jews contend when they hold that Christians saved by their Noachic faith will learn of its source in the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob?⁴⁶

Conclusion

To affirm Jesus as the Savior of the world entails the telling of the Great Story, a plot with its characters and events moving over time and space through conflict to resolution. Our reading of the sequence of its chapters seeks to honor the wider grace at work in the covenant with Noah and the longer work of grace in the proclamation of the Good News by a perseverance that reaches beyond death itself, and this without eliminating the offense of a particularist gospel. How much we need a Christology sturdier than the weak accommodations current among the pluralists! Yet also a bold particularity ready to acknowledge the wider and longer mercies of the triune God.⁴⁷ This paper is an attempt at a generous orthodoxy in interpreting his claim to be the way, the truth and the life, in the context of today’s religiously plural world.

⁴⁶ The writer engaged in just this exchange with Jewish philosopher, Michael Wyschogrod during a two year Jewish-Christian Theological Panel sponsored by the United Church of Christ. For a survey of its materials see “God’s Unbroken Covenant with the Jews,” *New Conversations* 12, 3 (Summer 1990).

⁴⁷ Philip Jenkins in *The Next Christendom: The Growth of Global Christianity* (New York: Oxford, 2001) documents the demographic changes of an eroding Northern Christianity with its strong pluralist strains and an exploding Southern Christianity with its own orthodox but not so generous tendencies.

Appendix

	<u>Way</u>	<u>Truth</u>	<u>Life</u>
(1)	C	C	C
(2)	C?	C?	C?
(3)	C	CP	C
(4)	PC?	PC?	PC?
(5)	C	PC	C
(6)	P	PC	CP
(7)	P	P	C?
(8)	PC	PC	PC
(9)	P	PC	P
(10)	P	PC	PC?