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The Finality of Christ and the Religious Alternative

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Abstract
This article shows how the modern category of religion largely shapes the horizon of many contemporary theological appropriations of the finality of Christ, and how the influence of this category creates serious problems. Though affirming Christ's finality often seems to pose theological difficulties in religiously pluralistic contexts, I argue that it is not at all a matter of exclusion or denigration of other religions. Quite the opposite: the doctrine at heart expresses the Christian community's hope for universal fellowship.

Keywords
category of religion, finality of Christ, religious pluralism, theology of religions, Rowan Williams

The church has declared that in Christ we find God's purpose for all of human history, that through him our knowledge of God is unsurpassable, and that with him we labor for the healing of the world and the coming of God's reign. The claim to the finality of Christ underlies the formation of Christian identity. Its focus on Christ for us associates it most intimately with the confession of faith (Rom 10:9) and the scriptural dynamic of our embodied, concrete transformation (*metanoia*), but the meaning of the claim confronts challenging questions in today's world. How do Christians speak, for example, about Jesus as "the mediator and fullness of all revelation" without implying a demeaning evaluation of other religions and ways of

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life?[1] How do they build strong, collaborative relationships without abandoning their commitment to Christ? The challenges posed by these questions are more than theoretical; they are also existential and integral to the formation of Christian community.

Drawing on the work of Rowan Williams, I argue for a way of conceiving the finality of Christ that speaks to the truth of the doctrinal tradition and meets the hermeneutical demands of contemporary pluralism. The article begins with a brief statement of the theological problem of finality and then contrasts two ways of conceiving the claim for Christ: a totalizing conception on the one hand, which often entails some sort of justification for privileging Christianity in the context of many religions, and an alternative conception that undermines the presuppositions for religious taxonomies and ranking systems.

Many attempts to address the theological problem of finality presuppose the modern category of religion, and I argue that this category entails difficulties and leads to totalizing conceptions of the meaning of Christ in history. The final sections of this article suggest a different way of thinking theologically about religious pluralism and the Christian claim to the finality of Christ. Rather than defining Christian identity by a strategy of exclusion, the claim to finality can mean the opposite. It can express the hope for human connection, community, and friendship that transgresses tribal boundaries.

The Challenge of Finality

The affirmations of traditional Christology by many accounts are crucial to how we understand Christianity in relation to the world's religions.[2] None is perhaps more important in this regard than the doctrine of Christ's finality. If Christians affirm that in Jesus we find the fullness and completeness of revelation, the final word of God spoken in the world of human affairs, then it seems that by the same stroke they also relatively diminish the significance of other religions and their ways of living. If, in other words, Jesus is "the way, and the truth, and the life" (John 14:6, NRSV throughout), then it seems that by not confessing faith in Christ non-Christian religions lack (at least to some degree, if not absolutely) both "the way" and, by extension, the decisive factor for genuine religiosity. The true religion points the way to the Father. It points to Jesus.

The finality of Christ seems then to imply the ascendancy of Christianity over the religions.[3] It seems to lock us into a kind of ranking system: in some way, Christianity

1. *Dei Verbum* (November 18, 1965), 2, http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651118_dei-verbum_en.html.
2. See, for example, the now classic volumes in the theologies of religions: John Hick and Paul F. Knitter, eds., *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness: Toward a Pluralistic Theology of Religions* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1987); Gavin D'Costa, ed., *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered: The Myth of a Pluralistic Theology of Religions* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1990).
3. See, for example, Leonard Swidler and Paul Moizes, eds., *The Uniqueness of Jesus: A Dialogue with Paul F. Knitter* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1997); Paul F. Knitter, ed., *The Myth of Religious Superiority: A Multifaith Exploration* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2005).

holds the real, saving truth, and the others by comparison are partial, incomplete, or perhaps simply wrong. However, relating Christianity to the religions hierarchically leaves many people feeling dissatisfied. It seems not to recognize the authenticity of other religions on their own terms and conflicts with what many Christians experience in their encounters with people of other faiths: their insight, loving relations, and perhaps real holiness. It also seems to conflict with the personal and collective failures that Christians know all too well in their own communities.

The pluralist decision to surrender all claims to finality and posit multiple saving ways does not necessarily solve the problem either since it flattens theological commitments. It makes the religions fundamentally compatible only by significantly revising them. If we believe that a religion's claims to finality are true and play a part in religious development (i.e., in truth, beauty, goodness, holiness)—that growth in grace happens in the context of, rather than in spite of, our historical, cultural, religious formation—then we are not likely to compromise these claims. How then can Christians affirm the finality of Christ without also positing Christian superiority and diminishing the relative value of other religions? Christians feel the weight of this problem when they want to reconcile their commitment to Christ's finality with their sense of the authenticity of other religions and their reluctance to account for the value of the religions in Christian terms.

Two Ways of Conceiving the Finality of Christ

The problem here arises when the claim to finality takes on certain assumptions that often drive how contemporary theology interprets the claim. The conception of finality that connects the claim to a ranking system for the religions tends to assume a definite relation between Jesus and other religious meanings and values. It assumes that finality completes the history of religions, making visible the full or most essential answer to religious aspiration, and that we can then make a judgment on Christianity's final relation to other religions. These assumptions lead to the problem described above, and I suggest that we need not accept them; they are separable from the claim.

Before going further, however, it will help to summarize two ways of conceiving Christ's finality that are at stake in my argument. Here I find Williams's work tremendously helpful.[4] He identifies an interpretation of finality that I would associate with the predominant view. In this approach, the claim assumes a "totality of meaning," implying that Christ contains all meanings, makes sense of the totality of human history, and justifies, completes, or makes explicit genuine religion. On the other hand, he offers an alternative view that interprets Christ's finality according to different assumptions about the meaning of Christ in history. On this view, the finality of Christ makes a claim about God's action in Christ, the kind of judgment that Christ makes in history, and how his judgment opens the possibility of connecting different schemes of meaning and value in the broadest possible context of community.

4. Rowan Williams, *On Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 93–106.

These two interpretations of finality make diverging assumptions about how theology appropriates and communicates Christological meaning. Both recognize the connection between the claim to the finality of Christ and the claim to his divinity, but their respective ways of negotiating the connection entail very different implications for theology's approach to history. If the former view somehow assumes the givenness of the totality of meaning in Christ, the latter refuses to short-circuit history with this theological judgment. If the former justifies the ascendency of Christianity and a ranking system for the religions, the latter view rejects the assumption that religions represent comparable systems of meaning. Rather than create outsiders on the grounds of a hierarchy of religions, the latter view of the finality of Christ expresses the Christian hope for the creative gift and task of universal friendship.

The Distinctiveness of the Claim to Finality

What then does the claim to finality require? If the claim can take on different assumptions or prior theological decisions that produce remarkably different interpretations, then what accounts for the distinctive content of the affirmation in each case? Because I want to argue in favor of an admittedly uncommon interpretation, I also want to show that it preserves the claim to Christ's finality. It does not jettison the claim along with the problematic assumptions of the predominant view.

If we begin broadly, we can identify basic trajectories of finality in late Jewish and early Christian apocalyptic literature, and thus in a wide range of tropes, symbols, and practices relating to, for example, Jewish messianic expectation, Jesus's announcement of the kingdom and the apostolic mission of preaching "good news," Paul's vision of a new creation and the time of the interim, and early millenarian expectations. Quite simply, the idea of finality belongs to eschatology. It refers to certain ways of expecting or hoping for redemption, to God's decisive, reconciling action in human affairs, and to the new situation (community, age, aeon) that God in the process brings about or creates. These foci tie the idea of finality to a nexus of Christian concerns about the significance of Jesus in the course of human history. But within these connections the way of conceiving Christ's finality can vary a good deal, and in the early church it developed considerably among different thinkers.

Jaroslav Pelikan argues that between Tertullian and Eusebius, finality became increasingly connected to the idea of universal history and in ways that entailed tension between the terms.[5] In Tertullian, for example, we read him praying for what seems like a contradiction: "the speedy coming of the end" and "the delay of the end" to come.[6] He prayed for delay in hopes of increasing the number of converts to the faith, and this postponement of finality led to a concept of universal history that placed Christians at the center of the world and the reason for its continuation.[7] The strategy

5. Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Finality of Jesus Christ in an Age of Universal History: A Dilemma of the Third Century* (Richmond: John Knox, 1966).
6. Ibid., 17, 7.
7. Ibid., 15–17.

of postponement also called for a refinement of finality that affirmed the eschatological "already" by interpreting the times of the present and its ethical choices in relation to the "not yet" of the *parousia*.

Other forms of eschatological thinking dealt differently with the tension. Ideas about the immortality of the soul in Origen and his disciples posed a particular version of the dilemma by transmuting finality into a species of universal history that no longer belonged to the history of Jesus Christ.[8] The same problem appears to arise in the works of Gregory of Nyssa, but Gregory in fact articulates a solution, explaining the soul's immortality by connecting the universality of grace to the finality of Jesus's life, death, and resurrection. "The immortality of God," Pelikan writes of Gregory's thinking, "had transformed the mortality of man into something incorruptible—first in Christ, then through Him in other men, because He had shared and thus revivified their mortal nature."[9] Rather than downplaying the difference between God and the soul or eliminating finality, Gregory understood the universalism of the soul's immortality as the "ultimate vindication of the finality of Christ."[10]

Both of the terms of the dilemma were vulnerable, however: if finality needed refinement (Tertullian) and salvaging (Gregory), still universality was under threat as well. The Donatists moralized universality at the expense of the catholicity of grace, and it was Augustine who held together the existential unity of the church (finality) with grace as an eschatological and sacramental reality (universal history). The Montanists put universality to a different kind of test: the finality of the Paraclete clearly undermined the finality of Christ, but it also compromised the universality of the Gospel. The full theological resolution of the problem emerged only with Trinitarian dogma, affirming as it does the unity of three divine persons. But Pelikan traces the end of his discussion to Eusebius and the *Ecclesiastical History*, which resolves the dilemma in its most complete form: theological analysis of Christ's finality finds supplementation and fulfillment in a historical narrative, which Eusebius "refused to cast … in any frame less ambitious than the universal history of the purpose of God with His world."[11]

The dilemma between finality and universal history arose differently according to different concerns in the early church, and Pelikan's analysis underscores the delicate balance that carried Christian thinking forward in the discreet instances of the dilemma's resolution. His analysis is instructive. If contemporary conceptions of Christ's significance in history sacrifice or warp the reconciliation of finality and universality, they also most likely miss the mark on a number of theological fronts (e.g., the universality of grace and the unity of the divine economy). The way the Christian confession moved forward in the life of the church—at least from the vantage point of a third-century dilemma looking back to the post-apostolic age and forward to Nicea and

8. Ibid., 19–20.
9. Ibid., 28.
10. Ibid., 30.
11. Ibid., 57.

post-Nicene thinking—makes the reconciliation of finality and universality integral to Christian faith.

Pelikan's analysis also points to the importance of a story about history for Christology. If we identify in Jesus the completeness and fullness of revelation, the decisive disclosure of the meaning of God and the human family for one another and the true end of all things, still we must also explain the meaning and significance of this affirmation of finality for theological reflection in distinct times and places and in the broadest possible scope. Though we may not wish to recapitulate Eusebius's historical narrative, and though our privileged place exposes his identification of the kingdom with the *imperium* as deeply problematic, we cannot let go of his project, namely, to resolve the finality of Christ with God's purpose for the actual, unfolding history of the world.

What Does the Claim to Finality Do?

Beyond describing a state of affairs, declaring what is the case with respect to Jesus in the course of human history, the claim to the finality of Christ also *does something*. It partly determines or at least shapes how Christians think of themselves in relation to others, how they understand the significance of their community, where they place their loyalties, how they interact with non-Christians and how they go about contributing to the world. If, for example, Christians were a persecuted minority in the third century, still Tertullian petitioned for the favor of the emperor in hopes of delaying the end and increasing conversions. The claim to finality takes shape in embodied ways within concrete environments. It partly controls issues of authority and identity (personal and communal), and these issues bear on concerns that tend to dominate our contemporary, pluralistic context of theology.

The concerns around identity and authority today are often tied to the association of finality with a determinate theological judgment about the significance of a particular religion for the course of human history. Debates about the finality of Christ tend to pivot on the question of religion and the validity of its claims in the company of competing options (e.g., other religions and non-religious views) rather than the imminence of the end of time or the immortality of the soul, for example. Each and every age has its concerns, preoccupations, and commitments, which for Christians shape (and are shaped by) the thinking around Christ's finality, and ours (at least in the West) seems to worry about how to carry forward religious faith in the global environment of religious pluralism and Western secularism.

Discourse on Christ's finality often presumes the question of finality in relation to the responsibilities of living in a pluralistic culture with a largely democratic ethos. Many theologians prefer dialogue and collaboration to approaches that concentrate on facilitating conversion to Christianity; they want to articulate an understanding of Christian faith that promotes peaceable relations with other religions. The worries that motivate them tend to emphasize issues of authority and the formation of identity as much as the inextricably related issues of truth and description.

The pluralist call for surrendering claims to finality out of responsiveness to the moral urgency of interreligious dialogue well illustrates the interrelatedness of these

two kinds of issues.[12] The formulation of this proposal subordinates the question of truth to questions of communal responsibility, and the rending of finality and universality equally illustrates the structure of the claim at stake: wanting to promote dialogue, the pluralist rejects the finality of Christ and proposes a revisionist Christology framed by a universal structure that has no inherent connection to the history of Jesus Christ.[13] Likewise, we can hear other theologians more inclined to inclusivism or exclusivism arguing that their iteration of "anonymous Christianity" or "*extra ecclesiam nulla salus*" both preserves the claim to finality and disposes them for genuine dialogue; they can still learn from the religious other, they insist, recognizing truth, goodness, and beauty outside the church, but they account for that presence (universal history) and assess its soteriological value differently.[14]

Rather than engage directly in these debates, I want simply to point out that they are concerned with two sets of intertwined issues: (i) truth and description (i.e., what is the case) and (ii) identity and action (i.e., who I am and how I live in relation to others). Though my proposal attempts to strengthen the reconciliation of finality and universality, it takes a distinctive position on how theology conceives universal history in relation to Christ's finality. Negatively, I contend that the mainline models (pluralism, inclusivism, exclusivism) short-circuit history with their judgments about the finality of Christ (despite their differences), and that the sense of urgency for these judgments originates with essentialist assumptions about religious pluralism and the related idea that it poses a problem for theology to resolve.

The Problem of Religious Pluralism and the Category of Religion

If the claim to finality presumes a world of many religions, then it also adopts the problem that goes along with it, namely the problem of choosing. Do we assert Christian superiority (however carefully nuanced and delicately expressed) or revise central doctrines (e.g., Incarnation, Trinity) perceived as inimical to or inconsistent with the fact of pluralism and the ethical obligation of dialogue? Despite the differences among the most popular of theological answers, the quandary here makes sense only when we assume different kinds of the same thing—that is, when the world's religions are corralled by a genus that begs the issue. In short, the claim to the finality of Christ produces this dilemma once it assumes the category of religion, which of

12. See, for example, Paul F. Knitter, "Is the Pluralist Model a Western Imposition? A Response in Five Voices," in *The Myth of Religious Superiority*, 28–42; Paul F. Knitter, "Five Theses on the Uniqueness of Jesus," in Swidler and Moizes, *The Uniqueness of Jesus*, 3–16.

13. See Paul F. Knitter, *Jesus and the Other Names: Christian Mission and Global Responsibility* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1996); Roger Haight, "Pluralist Christology as Orthodox," in Knitter, *The Myth of Religious Superiority*, 151–61.

14. See Karl Rahner, "Christianity and the Non-Christian Religions," in *Later Writings*, trans. Karl-H. Kruger, TI 5 (New York: Seabury, 1966), 115–34; Gavin D'Costa, *Christianity and World Religions: Disputed Questions in the Theology of Religions* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009).

itself has undergone serious critique in contemporary anthropology and sociology. In this section, I draw on this line of criticism in religious studies and social science to argue that theology interprets problematically the reality of pluralism and the claim to Christ's finality when influenced by the category of religion.

The most strident criticism of the category begins at the level of description. Definitions of religion fail to attract consensus, and to many they simply cannot satisfactorily account for the range of phenomena that scholars of religion consider. Such critiques take issue with the assumption or suggestion of the category's adequacy for describing something natural and discreetly identifiable. They argue that the particularities of purported religions are too diverse and intermingled with political, economic, and cultural variables, undermining attempts at verifying a distinctively religious dimension to the human condition. Consider Jonathan Z. Smith's oft-cited contention that scholars invent religion for analytic purposes:

> while there is a staggering amount of data, phenomena, of human experiences and expressions that might be characterized in one culture or another, by one criterion or another, as religion, there is no data for religion. Religion is solely the creation of the scholar's study. It is created for the scholar's analytic purposes by his imaginative acts of comparison and generalization. Religion has no existence apart from the academy.[15]

Smith locates religion in "a second order of reflection," suggesting that its use or imposition on data requires the scholar's self-consciousness. In other words, the category may demonstrate explanatory power in a given instance, but we must hold the scholar accountable for its application and not assume its naturalization (i.e., that religion exists somewhere out there in the world).

Many critiques of religion also focus on how the category functions in discourse, arguing that it reproduces or enacts historically distinctive configurations of power and authority. Though the etymology of religion (*religio*) dates to Cicero, Augustine, and Lactantius, the ancient authors would hardly recognize the meanings routinely attached to the term in contemporary Western speech.[16] The generalized notion of religion as a system of belief and practice separable from secular phenomena has a relatively recent history.[17] Dating to the sixteenth century, the modern understanding begins in the European imagination of colonizers and missionaries and their descriptions of "natives" according to their own ideals for humanity.[18] The category of

15. Jonathan Z. Smith, *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1982), xi.
16. E.A. Judge, "Was Christianity a Religion?" in *The First Christians in the Roman World*, ed. James R. Harrison (Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), 404–9.
17. Nicholas Lash, *The Beginning and the End of 'Religion'* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1996), 3–25, 168–69; William T. Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence: Secular Ideology and the Roots of Modern Conflict* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2009), 57–122.
18. Jonathan Z. Smith, "Religion, Religions, Religious," in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, ed. Mark C. Taylor (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1998), 269–84 at 269; Timothy Fitzgerald, *Discourse on Civility and Barbarity: A Critical History of Religion and Related Categories* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2007).

religion even in its incipient phase assumed universality, but as imposed from the outside it wields colonial power in its effects on indigenous ways of life.[19] Over the next few centuries, with the demise of Christendom, the emergence of new political forms (e.g., Calvin's Geneva, the English settlement of 1688, the American constitution), and the increasing availability of non-European texts in translation, the modern understanding of religion develops further along the axis of normativity (e.g., "our religion and theirs") and in concert with the secular.[20] It trades on the fabricated, politically charged assumption that it designates an essential aspect of the human condition, a feature of the natural order of things: all people are in some way religious, if only in an extremely distorted form.

The academic study of religion arose partly as a corrective to theological iterations of this kind of normativity. It developed in the modern crucible of scientific indifference to what believers and theologians deemed as "true religion." But the stripping away of theology left intact religion's essentialist domain in the scholarly pursuit of knowledge. Somewhat ironically, the very same critiques of normativity often apply to the academy's pretension to intellectual neutrality in defining religious phenomena.[21] Such pretensions are often naïve to their own complicity in power differentials, not to mention the tendency for some to reproduce the naturalism at the point of their departure (e.g., reducing religious phenomena to economic imperatives). The language of religion inscribes power and authority in projecting normative standards (e.g., this is religion; this is not), which, in certain cases, are enacted or enforced by the state. Analyses of how historically specific disciplines and forces produce religion further expose, say the critics of religion, the illegitimacy of the category's essentialist assumptions.

Despite the currency of the language of religion in theological circles, attentive as they are to Christianity's relation to the religions and the challenges of pluralism, the familiar picture of a world of many religions has serious problems. Since William Cantwell Smith penned his classic, *The Meaning and End of Religion* in 1962, awareness of this situation has only grown. Even then, Smith urged:

> On a verbal plane, I seriously suggest that terms such as Christianity, Buddhism, and the like must be dropped, as clearly untenable once challenged. The word 'religion' has had many meanings; it too would be better dropped. This is partly because of its distracting ambiguity, partly because most of its traditional meanings are, on scrutiny, illegitimate.[22]

Smith attacked the mistaken suppositions behind the language, disparaging the tendency to view the religions as entities, reified systems of belief and practice. His text had a tremendous impact. The academic study of religion could no longer unwittingly

19. David Chidister, *Savage Systems: Colonialism and Comparative Religion in Southern Africa* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia, 1996).
20. Paul J. Griffiths, "The Very Idea of Religion," *First Things*, May 2000, http://www.firstthings.com/article/2000/05/the-very-idea-of-religion.
21. Timothy Fitzgerald, *The Ideology of Religious Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2000), 3–32.
22. Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion* (1962; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 194.

formulate religion as a genus and use it to account for a diversity of species: Christianity, Buddhism, Judaism, Hinduism, Islam, Taoism, Indigenous religion, and Confucianism. If we take these critiques seriously, then we can no longer interpret our religiously plural context by simply assuming the category of "religion"; whatever the religions concretely are, they are not what we ordinarily think of them as being. The idea of religion itself is fraught with difficulties.

Arguments exposing the invention of religion are certainly not uniform or lacking in disagreement, however.[23] Rather than sort out their differences here, I wish to take up their critical orientation and focus on how the modern view of religion influences theological thinking about Christ's finality. If the category of religion illegitimately assumes universality, if it approaches religious communities according to trans-historical, trans-cultural expectations of religious phenomena, and if its historical development in the Western, Christian context of colonialism and the rise of secularism continues to place it within configurations of power and authority, then its use in Christian theology most likely risks these very same problems. Of course, the goals of Christian theology are not necessarily the goals of comparative religion, but even when acknowledging a theological claim to universality, we need not accept the particular claim implicit in the generic view of religion.[24] But then how do we think of Christ when we cease thinking of Christianity as a religion?

Answers here are not wanting. Many theologians argue that theology should avoid striking an alliance with religion. For example, Karl Barth's critique of religion as unbelief and Dietrich Bonhoeffer's plea for "religionless Christianity" elaborate powerful suspicions of theology's capacity for surrendering the redemptive truth of the Gospel to distortive criteria.[25] Both insist that our thinking about Christ should not acquiesce to the thinking of Christianity, *the religion*. But the analytic problem with

23. For example, Talal Asad criticizes the lingering essentialism of Smith's analysis of faith and cumulative tradition in *Meaning and End of Religion*. He also suggests that Smith's reification thesis, with which Smith identifies Islam as perhaps the most "entity-like," assumes that monotheistic religions are "quintessentially intolerant," and in Smith's application to Islam's presence in India represents an "Orientalist narrative." See Talal Asad, "Reading a Modern Classic: W.C. Smith's 'The Meaning and End of Religion'," *History of Religions* 40 (2001): 205–22 at 209–12, https://doi.org/10.1086/463633. For a more general analysis of disagreement and development in the literature, see William E. Arnal and Russell T. McCutcheon, *The Sacred Is the Profane: The Political Nature of 'Religion'* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2013), 102–13.

24. Many critics of "religion" see this implicit claim to universality as thoroughly theological and would likely doubt the suggestion that theology could make a claim to universality that would not reproduce the difficulties and problems associated with "religion." I address this issue in the final sections below.

25. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. 1.2, *The Doctrine of the Word of God*, eds. G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1975), 280–360; Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, eds. Christian Gremmels and John W. De Gruchy, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works 8 (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010), 362–65. At 364, Bonhoeffer offers a brief criticism of Barth that complements my critique of the totalizing conceptions of finality.

the category of religion goes deeper than what a theological rejection of religion can correct. If we condemn all attempts at deriving theological criteria apart from revelation (à la Barth's critique of natural theology), still we must also account for historically specific, background assumptions and power differentials that significantly shape the Gospel's communication and reception, however opaquely. Meanings are enacted in concrete, embodied contexts and in ways that often outstrip an individual's intentionality. No doubt we must read Barth and Bonhoeffer in tune with their condemnations of National Socialism and the jingoist theology of their day, but we must also contend with the broader context of theology's performance in the modern era of religion and the state. The problem of religion for theology is not just that it prevents or distracts us from the Gospel's startling truth. It also shapes how we hear and speak the truth even when we want nothing to do with it.

The modern view of religion determines the horizon of theological thinking when certain assumptions about religion are at work. If we assume that religion demarcates an essential dimension of the human condition, ostensibly referring to a system of belief and practice separable from secular phenomena and oriented soteriologically to a transcendent reality, then we accept the category, however unreflectively. Such assumptions naturalize religion, allowing it to function in theology as a genus for the various religions of the world. In turn, theological discussions of religious pluralism become overwhelmingly preoccupied with competing claims to finality. If religion is universal, if there are yet very different religions in the history of human affairs, then we must choose, and the theology of religions becomes a matter of explaining that choice. In fact, this branch of theology traditionally focuses on a judgment concerning a plurality of universal religious truth claims.[26]

The finality of Christ usually carries the weight of this judgment. The pluralists, for example, reject finality and with it what they perceive as justification for Christian superiority, while others affirm finality and explain why humility and attentiveness are still important Christian virtues in interreligious dialogue. The claim to finality in each scenario establishes the truth of Christianity either over or (by negation) in egalitarian relation to other religious truths, and it makes this constellation of truths by assuming the approach that Williams identifies with a "totality of meaning." It lifts the reality of faith out of the vagaries of history and the embodied, material processes generative of Christian identity, thereby absolutizing and de-historicizing Christianity's central message. The affirmation of finality (or its rejection) pronounces judgment on Christianity

26. See the early, influential work of Alan Race: "The Christian theology of religions is the endeavor to adumbrate 'some doctrine of other religions', to evaluate the relationship between the Christian faith and the faith of the other religions." Race, *Christians and Religious Pluralism: Patterns in the Christian Theology of Religions* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1982), 3. The problem of religious truth largely drives the book's discussion of this evaluation. Race addresses it thematically in the final chapter, arguing in support of the pluralist model: "Pluralism in the Christian theology of religions seeks to draw the faiths of the world's religious past into a mutual recognition of one another's truths and values, in order for truth itself to come into proper focus." Race, *Christians and Religious Pluralism*, 148.

in relation to the religions by analytically eliminating (somewhat ironically) the interruptive influence of human history.[27] But this way of approaching finality and religious pluralism makes the complex problem of religion largely determinative of theology's horizon, and in naturalizing religion overlooks the way that "religion" functions in discourse formatively, enacting historically distinctive relations of work and power.

The Finality of Christ beyond Religion: Reflections on Method

If we accept the criticism of the category of religion, then we are left with questions about how we should think about theology's religiously plural environment and Christianity's relations to the religions. How should we reimagine the situation? It may help to begin by saying that affirming this critical orientation does not necessarily lead to a murky relativism, eliding religious differences, or limit us to social scientific analyses that favor agnostic or atheistic postures to transcendent realities. It seems to me that Christianity has strong reasons apart from the category of religion for recognizing the importance of embodied history in trying to understand the transcendent reality of God. But if not with the category of religion, then how should we proceed? How should we think about Christianity and the finality of Christ beyond religion?

Simply changing the language to "faith" or "sacred" only reproduces the problem if the category's essentialist assumptions and politics are not also interrogated. Rather than change the word "religion," I suggest that we begin with recognition of its invention, attending to how the word functions, what it does, enacts, and makes possible in human relations.[28] The anthropological and sociological critiques of religion are helpful for theology because they address the capacity of religion for generating a particular subjectivity within a circumscribed social space. The critique of the category's naturalization aims to explain how religion concretely forms us rather than merely to refute its validity, and this goal complements contemporary desires (especially among contextual and liberation theologians) for understanding how theology contributes to historic patterns of sinful and redemptive social relations—for example, the concern of feminist theologians for alternatives in Christian discourse and liturgy to the androcentric language that reinforces patriarchal relations in society and the church.

27. I believe this point applies to Karl Rahner as well. Though Rahner recognizes the importance of history and religious particularities for the concrete mediation of grace, his theory of the supernatural existential allows him to argue on dogmatic grounds for the true explanation of the reality of grace in non-Christian religions. The hermeneutical priority of dogma leads him to argue that by its inner dynamism anonymous Christianity must become explicit, as he says in Karl Rahner, "Anonymous Christianity and the Missionary Task of the Church," in *Confrontations 2*, trans. David Bourke, TI 12 (London: Darton, Longman, and Todd, 1974), 161–78 at 171.

28. Talal Asad's critique of religion is oriented by this constructive orientation. See Craig Martin, "*Genealogies of Religion*, Twenty Years On: An Interview with Talal Asad," *Bulletin for the Study of Religion* 43 (2014): 12–17, https://doi.org/10.1558/bsor.v43i1.12.

Beyond the essentialism of religion, the way forward for theology lies in a shift of focus; that is, theology should focus more intentionally on what it does rather than presuming essentialist systems or definitions of religion. It should focus on particular judgments and decisions, how those judgments are related to nests of other judgments, and how our judgments and decisions function creatively in social realities. Rather than wonder about Christianity and its relation to apparently similar things (i.e., other religions), we should address the particular judgments that different people and communities make, why and in what conditions they make those judgments, how they relate their judgments to various decisions about what they say and do, and what they bring about or enact in social and cultural relations.[29] Such a shift in focus allows us to attend to the way that theological judgments are tied up with a host of meanings within specific historical contexts. Of course, answers are not always clear or forthcoming, but questions governed by attentiveness to the performance of theology are oriented more faithfully and critically to the meanings of specific judgments within their concrete environments than are essentialist frameworks or schemas. Or, as another way of putting it, we should take issue in discussions of pluralism with the judgment of religion and its essentialism because of its analytic problems.

Analytically, the category of religion abstracts the religions from their material conditions and effectively dims attentiveness to the discursive and non-discursive processes that make the religions intelligible in concrete circumstances. Such abstraction transforms the religions into comparable systems of meaning that exist independently of their social, historical lives, and leads to conclusions about religion that undermine the agency of participants and enact relations of power that often go unnoticed or at least unquestioned.[30] In other words, essentialist categorizing may allow theologians to compare and relate the religions, but it also screens out the unique ways that individuals and (internally diverse) communities express themselves and account for their beliefs and actions in their social relations. The mainline positions in the theology of religions tend toward these problems by resolving the fact of pluralism with taxonomies or rankings based on overarching philosophical frameworks or foundational doctrinal commitments, and

29. The suggestion of moving beyond the category of religion does not prevent us from understanding Augustine's use of the term or arguments "against Judaism" in antiquity. On the contrary, the approach suggested here enables us to grasp more accurately what authors in the early church meant and thus to engage their theological contentions more responsibly. See, for example, the readings of "religion" in antiquity in Brent Nongbri, *Before Religion: A History of a Modern Concept* (New Haven: Yale University, 2013).

30. James Fredericks criticizes theological attempts at theorizing about other religions and urges theologians to comparatively engage religious particularities; see, for example, James Fredericks, "A Universal Religious Experience? Comparative Theology as an Alternative to a Theology of Religions," *Horizons* 22 (1995): 67–87, https://doi.org/10.1017/s0360966900028942. His critique seems to me to resonate with what Talal Asad calls "cultural translation" in the context of anthropology; see Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University, 1993), 171–99, esp. 194–99.

these classifying schemes function authoritatively in (re-)creating the reality of religious pluralism and the historically distinctive forces of work and power associated with it (e.g., privileging certain religions, setting apart the nation state).[31]

If we return to the two ways of conceiving the finality of Christ mentioned earlier, then we can see two different judgments at stake. The totalizing conception imagines the meaning of Christ's finality as rising above history and existing (out there in the world) apart from who Christians are, how their relations are structured, and how they follow Jesus, how they labor for the Reign. It allows for the comparing and assessing of the religions because it abstracts from the history on which it pronounces its determinations. The alternative conception makes a different kind of judgment. It imagines the meaning of Christ's finality as critically orienting us to the meaning of the world in its concrete emergence: speaking of Jesus as the end of all things need not lock us into essentialism. It can mean that his judgment in history invites us into a project of communication that transgresses tribal boundaries, connecting different schemes of meaning and value into the reality of human community, and discloses to us the meaning of our participation in the very life of God. It can entail attentiveness to the most creative possibilities for human connection and meaning. Rather than foreclosing history, the finality of Christ can open us to its deepest possibilities, however shrouded they may be in darkness and uncertainty. Both models attempt to reconcile finality with universality, but they conceive theology's approach to history and Christological meaning differently.

When Williams explains the vital insight into this different way of thinking about Christ, he refers to Cornelius Ernst.[32] Ernst's work helps to sharpen our focus on the connection between theological method and the content of the claim to finality, for he recognizes that theology participates in historic patterns of redemption.[33] He focuses on the gift of salvation in Jesus and speaks of him as the (ontic) answer to the human quest for God, but he distinguishes this answer from the kind of (ontological) answer that would satisfy our search for understanding the meaning of human history in relation to God as what Ernst terms "the meaning of meaning."[34] The theological attempt

31. Consider, for example, Jean Daniélou's theological taxonomy of religions and description of Islam as a "regression"; see Jean Daniélou, *The Lord of History: Reflections on the Inner Meaning of History*, trans. Nigel Abercrombie (London: Longmans, 1958); Adam Sparks, "The Fulfilment Theology of Jean Daniélou, Karl Rahner and Jacques Dupuis," *New Blackfriars* 89 (2008): 633–56 at 642, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2008.00247.x.
32. Williams, *On Christian Theology*, 93–94. Specifically, Williams mentions Ernst's schema of "God as the Meaning of meaning," out of which Ernst's theology largely operates.
33. See Cornelius Ernst, *Multiple Echo: Explorations in Theology*, ed. Fergus Kerr and Timothy Radcliffe (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1979), esp. 76–86. Ernst's approach resonates well with Bernard Lonergan's proposal for a methodical theology, which at once makes meaning basic to theology and identifies theological foundations with the conversion of the theologian. See Bernard J.F. Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (Toronto: University of Toronto, 1990). For a discussion of Ernst and Lonergan, addressing critical and constructive differences, see Louis Roy, "Cornelius Ernst's Theological Seeds," *New Blackfriars* 85 (2004): 459–70, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2004.00045.x.
34. Ernst, *Multiple Echo*, 84.

to reflect on how Christ, the (ontic) answer, satisfies the (ontological) quest for complete explanation remains vulnerable to a host of problems, errors, and wrong turns (e.g., totalizing conceptions that foreclose the quest).

Many theologians may acknowledge that theology's concrete participation in history bears some ambiguity, if not ambivalence, in the history of a multiplicity of theologies. Ernst suggests that we must ask about the meaning of this historic succession with an adequate theory of meaning and in a way that does not presuppose the perspective of any single theology.[35] He wants us to ask about the meaning of this historic succession as part of the radical theological problem of articulating the meaning of God and the human family for one another. Rather than recommending a new theory of everything, Ernst proposes here what seems to me rather like a constructive shift in focus. His proposal assumes that theology does more than describe or explain more or less well and with varying degrees of authority; theology also functions creatively in the structure and dynamism of human relations, and does so in the very task of rearticulating a meaning that ever outstrips us by its greatness. Not only because of the content of theological problems and questions, oriented as they are to the "meaning of meaning," but also because of our finitude and theology's incompleteness, the creativity of our theological performance anticipates the concretely unfolding meaning of humans-in-their-togetherness. In other words, theology anticipates the creation of culture. Elaborating on the question of the historic succession of theologies, Ernst writes:

> The substantive ("ontic") answer to this question we already have in Jesus Christ, and can have no other. It is the ("ontological") meaning of this substantive meaning we must continually search for without expecting any final answer … How could this ontological meaning become articulate? What "structure" could it have in a single mind? In fact it could only exist as a total human culture, the progressive discovery of a single human identity in Christ as the historic process of the diverse but related processes of self-discovery going on in distinct cultures all over the globe in response to the challenge and threat of a uniform technological mass-culture.[36]

Speaking of our ongoing search for the "ontological meaning of this substantive meaning," Ernst shifts our attempt to understand how Jesus answers the human quest for God. If I understand him correctly, he asks us to consider the significance of what theology does in terms of our capacity for participation in the Wisdom of God. Because meaning embraces the whole of who we are, and because we communicate meaningfully in multiple ways, we must understand our capacity for realizing the meaning of "God and humans for one another"—the meaning historically and practically given in

35. Ernst, *Multiple Echo*, 84–86. Lonergan's theories of meaning and history offer important conversation partners here. Building on Lonergan's work, Robert Doran proposes a way of conceiving systematic theology as a theological theory of history that accounts for the historic succession of theologies; see Robert M. Doran, "System and History: The Challenge to Catholic Systematic Theology," *Theological Studies* 60 (1999): 652–78, https://doi.org/10.1177/004056399906000403.

36. Ernst, *Multiple Echo*, 85.

Jesus—as at once a capacity for deep human connection and a capacity that we truly share. Only in our togetherness can we really affirm in the concreteness of our speech, action, and personal presence the meaning of God and the human family for one another.[37]

If we cannot individually conceive this ontological meaning, still by living in active relation to Jesus we know that our communal participation in divine Wisdom creatively brings it about ("on earth as it is in heaven") as a "single human identity in Christ." But with Ernst we should understand this "single identity" not as given, but as "progressively discovered"—not as culturally monolithic and hegemonic, but as embracing historically distinctive processes of self-discovery in many cultures. The threats are real (e.g., technocracy, systematic lying, criminal evasions and neglect, complex artifice[38]), but Christology and theological method mutually tie the affirmation of the finality of Christ to our capacity for participating in the very life of God—the concrete meaning of which we find in Jesus and in those who imitate him.[39]

Rethinking the Finality of Christ and the Transforming Reality of Christian Faith

How, then, do we articulate the meaning of the claim to finality in terms of an understanding of universal history adequate to Christian living and participation in historic patterns of sin, grace, and redemption? On the question of Christ's finality, Williams suggests that we return to our "founding myths," and I believe he makes this suggestion because he recognizes our involvement in the project or mission of an "unrestrictedly human discourse" on the basis of what he grasps as the theological meaning of the story about Jesus.[40] In other words, Christians are committed to this project specifically because of their belief in the finality of Christ. In Christ, we find the key to understanding the purpose of God for the universal history of the world, and without Christ this project has no key or cornerstone.

In this section, I return to our founding myths with my central thesis: speaking of Jesus as the end anticipates the connecting and drawing together of different schemes of meaning and value into the reality of human community and in the broadest possible scope by affirming in relation to Jesus the gift of God's redeeming presence both within and outside the religious community. The finality of Christ makes outsiders

37. See Lonergan's explanation of obediential potency and the mystical body of Christ as a manifestation of vertical finality in Bernard J.F. Lonergan, *Collection*, ed. Frederick E. Crowe and Robert M. Doran, CW 4 (Toronto: University of Toronto, 1988), 17–52 at 20–21.
38. Thomas Merton, *Love and Living*, ed. Naomi Burton Stone and Patrick Hart (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1979), 4.
39. Of course, what exactly constitutes authentic communication and connection in any given instance can be anything but clear. The most powerful way to connect may entail silence or even distance.
40. Williams, *On Christian Theology*, 95.

integral to the task of reconceiving what it means to follow Jesus in each and every age and place.

The New Testament confronts us with a first-century Jew who announces God's decisive, reconciling action in the world to the particular community most prepared to recognize it. He suffers crucifixion and death because specific, politicized styles of first-century Jewishness decidedly do not recognize it and reject the claim to Israel's identity that he makes with his ministry.[41] The Gospels make the claim to finality for Jesus inseparable from God's dispossessing the religious community of all pretensions to finality for itself, fulfilling the hope of Israel by reconstructing it. The link in the text between Jesus and how we conceive of a human community in relation to God's redemptive power assumes an understanding of Jesus within the political history of Israel and a distinctive pattern of arguing over Israel's eschatological identity.[42] The link focuses on the meanings of specific judgments and decisions within the life of a particular community.

Unlike the "totality of meaning" approach, this reading opposes attempts at ordering the religions of Christianity and Judaism, as if relating comparable systems of meaning rather than focusing on how and why certain judgments and decisions are contested at a particular juncture in the life of a community. History gives far too much witness to the terrible mistake of reading this dispossession according to the logic of replacing one religion with another, as, for example, when the church embraces its political and cultural strength with anti-Semitic fervor. The story can also say something very different. As Williams explains: "It is not that a scheme of ideas called 'Judaism' rejects Jesus, or that an undifferentiated body of adherents to this religion turn their backs on him; there is a mortal conflict between Jesus's claim on Israel's identity, and the way that identity is sustained by the rulers of Israel at that specific moment."[43]

On Williams's approach, we encounter a way of interpreting the claim to finality in strict view of an episode in a specific religious and political history that imagines a dramatic reconstruction of the religious response to God's redemptive initiative occurring under the pressure of that very initiative. Rather than a "totality of meaning," the claim to finality says that in Jesus we discover the key to God's salvific action in human affairs. By calling his community to move beyond tribal forms of identity and exclusion, Jesus reveals God's desire for us to share in God's universal reconciliation of the human family by entering into the kinds of relationships that Jesus modeled. He reveals what it means to participate in the life of God. Drawing on Ernst, Williams explains:

> Jesus does not have to mean everything; his "universal significance" is a universally crucial question rather than a comprehensive ontological schema. We may still want to confess that in Christ "all things cohere," but it is possible to understand this as saying not that "in Christ all meanings are contained" but that "on Christ's judgment all histories converge."[44]

41. Williams, *On Christian Theology*, 98–102.
42. Ibid. Williams refers to Ben F. Meyer, *The Aims of Jesus* (London: SCM Press, 1979).
43. Williams, *On Christian Theology*, 98.
44. Ibid., 94.

The proximate judgment at stake here belongs to those who make Christ's judgment both "test" and "catalyst" for all other meanings and values within their social, cultural, and religious histories.[45] The claim to Christ's finality raises the question about what it means to follow Jesus the question of true discipleship, because it says that we should focus our response to God—who "became flesh and dwelt among us" (John 1:14), *in him*. The claim reproduces or keeps alive the question that Jesus poses about how God's self-giving presence in history re-shapes our response to God.

The judgment about Christ as the "fullness of revelation" says something, then, about Jesus and the difference he makes to the world rather than to the determinative whole of knowledge (which lies beyond us). It says that responding to him in faith commits the community to ongoing conversion, growth in self-transcendence, and communal relations with outsiders in view of authentic participation in God's reconciling action. In Christ, "the deepest truth about God" dispossesses us of our attempts at controlling and mastering religious meanings. If we embrace the question of discipleship and thereby conceive Christian identity and tradition as tasks—ever contested efforts to say what true discipleship means for us now—then we can appreciate that Christ makes outsiders integral to the formation of who we are, and that others perform this identity differently within our own context, all of which challenges sectarian forms of complacency and exclusion.

The typical proof-texting in ordinary Christian speech on finality usually emphasizes biblical texts that accommodate the problem of choosing among many options—for example, Jesus as "the way, the truth, and the life," and "there is salvation in no one else." If we wish to turn to Scripture for a different way of theologically conceiving finality in our contemporary milieu, it may help to begin with the teaching about discipleship in Mark 9:30 rather than the more commonly rehearsed texts. Of course, discussions of finality do not ordinarily cite this text from Mark, but I think it speaks about identity in a way that enriches our reading of the claim.

This passage begins with Jesus hoping to go unnoticed on his way through Galilee because he wants to teach his disciples. He tells them about his violent death and resurrection, but the disciples fail to understand and feel afraid to ask him about it. In Capernaum, when he asks what they argued about on the road, they fall silent again, but for a different reason: "for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest" (Mark 9:34). The parallel of the disciples' inability to reply to Jesus emphasizes the difficulty of following him: the incapacity to comprehend the meaning of his being killed ties into their distorted self-understanding about their participation in his ministry.[46] Jesus then teaches them about true greatness: "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all" (Mark 9:35).

The chapter continues on this theme of discipleship, focusing on the question of outsiders. The disciples say they tried to stop "someone casting out demons" in Jesus's name,

45. Ibid.

46. Joel Marcus, *Mark 8–16*, Anchor Yale Bible (New Haven: Yale University, 2009), 680.

and explain that they did this "because he was not following us" (Mark 9:38).[47] The text confronts us with the strategy of building a communal identity over and against another, and of simultaneously establishing the community's superiority in the gap. The disciples want to protect their group's identity by separating themselves from someone outside their ranks, but Jesus corrects them: "whoever is not against us is for us" (Mark 9:40). He teaches them about being a part of a community without rivalry and tribalism, encouraging them to regard outsiders not as threats—and thus as presenting an overly determined choice of either absorption or rejection—but as participants in his mission.

The text extends this insight both positively and negatively to a judgment about outsiders: "For whoever gives you a cup of water to drink in (my) name because you are from Christ, truly I say to you that he will not lose his reward. And whoever causes one of these little ones who believe (in me) to stumble, it would be better for him to have a millstone hung around his neck and for him to be cast into the sea" (Mark 9:41–42).[48] Both positively and negatively, the judgment about outsiders defers to apocalyptic judgment; it links to the wisdom of God and the in-breaking of God's reign with Jesus' presence.[49]

The text applies this dynamic to the inner life of the community as well, warning the disciples not to act in ways that oppose Jesus' mission: "If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life maimed than to have two hands and to go to hell, the unquenchable fire" (Mark 9:43).[50] The authentic life of the community depends on Jesus's invitation and the disciples' willingness to join him in carrying out

47. Marcus contends that this text most likely refers to an outsider rather than a Christian who did not belong to the "official circles" represented by John and the Twelve; see *Mark 8–16*, 684.

48. I'm grateful to my colleague, Benjamin Edsall, for this translation, which, by repeating "whoever" in 9:40–42, emphasizes the teaching about outsiders in these pericopes (Marcus argues that 9:41 begins a new unit). The NRSV's choice of a paragraph break and use of the second person at 9:42 obscures the referential transition from outsiders to the disciples at 9:43. Speaking of 9:43–48, Marcus says: "The focus now shifts from offenses against the Markan Christians to offenses potentially committed by them. The church, then, is not an island of sanctity in a sea of sin but an arena in which Satan remains active." *Mark 8–16*, 695–96.

49. Marcus, *Mark 8–16*, 695–99.

50. This text often elicits readings that measure Christian identity according to a strict moralism. The true disciple cuts off his or her hand, foot, or eye if it creates a stumbling block to moral perfection (Mk 9:43–48). Such readings seem to relinquish the narrative core of the text, which defines participation in Jesus' community by imitating him in carrying out what the Father wills. Marcus critiques several exegetes (e.g., Will Deming, Robert Gundry, and Dale Allison), who interpret the references to hand, foot, and eye according to OT and post-biblical Jewish tropes related to sexual sin (*Mark 8–16*, 696–97). He does not suggest an alternative interpretation apart from "sinning," however. On my reading, the main point of 9:33–50, the teaching about "humility as the path to greatness" in the context of communal relations (see Marcus, *Mark 8–16*, 677), indicates the nature of the sinning (i.e., the reason for the cleaving of the body part, metaphorically speaking). The disciple who associates his or her faith in Jesus with a self-serving wielding of power over another no longer rightly acts in his name, hence the return of the text to the main point in the final line: "be at peace with one another."

the Father's will rather than loyalist membership in his group. Here we find the clearest path to exclusion from Jesus's community: if those who believe in him get drawn into power battles, devaluing others, if they seek to belittle or abandon others, they exclude themselves from Jesus's company, as if "thrown into hell" with both feet (Mark 9:45). His community must be wary of members who act in this way, for they put the whole body in peril of losing his presence. The text contrasts the disciples' fixation on being the greatest—a stumbling block to their comprehension of his mission—with the understanding of true community that Jesus pronounces with a command: "Be at peace with one another" (Mark 9:50).

The claim to the finality of Christ says that God gives God's very self to the human family in Jesus, who calls his disciples to a very specific way of being in community, a way of transgressing tribal boundaries by the power of God's mercy, and who charges and empowers them with the process of recreating in different times and places this way of being for others. Jesus calls his listeners to faithfulness to God according to a Samaritan's example, and thus in certain juxtaposition to the creation of outsiders by religion (Luke 10:37). The texts that people most often cite in discussions of Christ's finality arguably make better sense when read in this way. In Jesus, we discover "the way, the truth, and the life," if we hear him in the farewell discourse calling our attention to Calvary and the way of the cross (John 14:6), though "none of us," as Nicholas Lash reminds us, "no individual and no social form, especially the form we call 'the Church'—knows the extent to which, along that road, we are companions of the Crucified or collaborators in his crucifixion."[51] Likewise, in Acts, if we witness the figure of the victim being held up to the elders who justify their lynching of him with religion, then we grasp something much more specific about his mission, recognizing that he brings about human community by connecting the call for repentance to his embodied gift of new life, of forgiveness and love given in exchange for the violence against him. Only the forgiving victim enables us—as placed with those responsible for the violence—to find the truth of God's redeeming power; "there is salvation in no one else" (Acts 4:12).

Conclusion

The Nicene affirmation of the Son as consubstantial with the Father declares both the finality of Christ and the universality of his redemptive significance in the economy of salvation. Still, it remains an open question as to how we understand this reconciliation and conceive the dynamics of faith and theology in the process of history. The modern category of religion threatens to warp this delicate balance by undercutting the historical particularities that are integral to our asserting of finality in relation to the history of Jesus and our affirming the significance of the Gospel in relation to each and every time and place. Such undercutting creates the conditions for theology to ask about Christianity's relation to the religions, as if comparing comparable systems of

51. Lash, *Beginning and End of Religion*, 263.

meaning; the theology of religions tends to assume this totalizing way of thinking. If we uproot the essentialist influence of religion on theology, then we may reclaim the finality of Jesus Christ. Making the claim entails both recognition of God's decisive action in Christ and the decision to embrace Jesus's command: "Love one another as I have loved you" (John 15:12). The finality of Christ expresses the hope of entering into genuine friendship with all people, in imitation of Christ, and according to no predetermined plan or logic for what Christian identity must include or exclude over time. The eschatological takes the place of religion.[52] The reconciliation of finality and universality faces us with the task of living a witness to the judgment of Christ by constantly undergoing the pressure of God's mercy in the vicissitudes of history:

> To theologize about the Incarnation, then, may be something other than a search for ways of demonstrating the comprehensive meaningfulness of Jesus (and thus, normally, of the Church's language); it can be, more demandingly, the effort to preserve the edge of conflict between ideology and honest discourse about God. It can thus be the charter for the task of Christian self-criticism, and for the spirituality of negation and absence, "luminous darkness," that has continued, despite everything, to work with Christianity as a counter to its institutional confidence.[53]

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52. It seems to me that this preference for eschatology helps rather than hinders Catholic ecclesiology and sacramental theology, neither of which are served well by the category of religion.
53. Williams, *On Christian Theology*, 100.