

Jesus and E.T.

Identity of Jesus the Christ in View of Ultimate Pluralism

Center of Theological Inquiry, Princeton
Pastor-Theologian Program 2003-2004
Rev. Daniel G. Conklin

Outline

Introduction

Ultimate Pluralism

How our World View Has Changed
 Probability of ETL, ETI, ETC
 Drake Equation
 Fermi Paradox
 Extraterrestrial Life
 Extraterrestrial Intelligence
 Extraterrestrial Civilization
 We Are Not Alone
 Where and How Does Jesus “Fit In”

Identity of Jesus the Christ

Scandal of Narrative Particularity
 Sophia/Logos Poesy
 Sacrifice, Atonement and Impassibility

Chalcedon for the 21st Century – Sketch of a Theology of Nature

A Million Alien Gospels – A Poetic Conclusion

Introduction

“Christians have to ask themselves (and skeptics will certainly ask *them*), What can the cosmic significance possibly be of the localized, terrestrial event of the existence of the historical Jesus? Does not the mere possibility of extraterrestrial life render nonsensical all the superlative claims made by the Christian church about his significance? Would ET, Alpha-Arcturians, Martians, et al., need an incarnation and all it is supposed to accomplish, as much as *homo sapiens* on planet Earth? Only

a contemporary theology that can cope convincingly with such questions can hope to be credible today.”

Arthur Peacocke, “The Challenge and Stimulus of the Epic of Evolution to Theology,” in Steven Dick’s (ed.) **Many Worlds**, 2000.

This study focuses on one aspect of the overall theme of “the identity of Jesus in a pluralistic world.” That aspect I have called ultimate pluralism, i.e. the presumed existence of extraterrestrial, sentient beings self-organized into civilization(s) with their own histories. The identity of Jesus – an area of Christian theology traditionally called Christology – is a central endeavor in the articulation of the Christian faith. How would or might that endeavor be influenced or affected by the discovery of extraterrestrial life, intelligence and perhaps even civilization? A brief formulation of the theme of this paper points to a natural internal differentiation: Extraterrestrial *life*, extraterrestrial *intelligence*, and extraterrestrial *civilization* (ETL, ETI, ETC) are each distinct issues and the question at hand needs to be considered in light of each possibility.

But let’s be clear at the outset: none of these ET possibilities has been proven and the current scientifically correct answer to the question of the existence of any ET realities is: we don’t know. We humans may indeed be alone in the universe. Why even venture out into such speculative territory? Why not wait until such time as evidence for some ET living reality has been scientifically/empirically shown to be the case? These objections should not be dismissed lightly.

First of all, the question at hand, formulated in terms of ultimate pluralism, does, however, have relevance to the issue of the relationship between Christianity and the other terrestrial religions and the author hopes to show that relevance. Secondly, indications *seem* to be increasing for the presumption of extraterrestrial *life* at the very least and the currently incoming reports from the Martian rovers, Spirit and Opportunity, make the daily news. Quite literally empirical evidence of extraterrestrial *life* could be forthcoming any day now, especially since the most recent discovery of the past existence of liquid water in abundance on the planet Mars. Finally, the SETI project – Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence – now funded privately continues and could at some point

discover a signal, the interpretation of which could be viewed as evidence of extraterrestrial intelligence. All of these matters taken together provide *this* author with sufficient reason to deal with this theme, making it not simply a matter of idle speculation.

Two things in particular sparked the author's intellectual curiosity to focus on the theme of ultimate pluralism: Paul Davies' "*E.T. and God: Could earthly religions survive the discovery of life elsewhere in the universe?*" (Atlantic Monthly, September 2003, pp. 112-118) and Steven Dick (ed.), **Many Worlds: The New Universe, Extraterrestrial Life and the Theological Implications**, Templeton Foundation Press, Philadelphia and London, 2000. Also, let it not be kept secret, imaginative works of science fiction have exerted an influence on the author, in particular the two novels of Mary Doria Russell, **The Sparrow** and **The Children of God**.

So much for ultimate pluralism, to which we will return presently.

The other half of this theme is the identity of Jesus or, as it has traditionally been called in theological shorthand: Christology. Who was/is Jesus? Who is he for the first Christians, for us today, for the world, for the cosmos? There is no doubt that ancient Christian authors saw in Jesus much more than the humble preacher and miracle worker of antiquity. The christological hymns of the New Testament (John 1, Philippians 2, Colossians 1 and Hebrews 1) as well as the confession of Peter in the Gospels and numerous other passages in the New Testament have all contributed to an understanding of the identity of Jesus which reached its zenith in the Definition of the Union of the Divine and Human Natures in the Person of Christ, Act V of the Council of Chalcedon in 451 C.E. (Cf. Book of Common Prayer, p. 864). In many quarters today this "high" christology has fallen out of favor and the humble preacher and miracle worker is seen by many as the "true" (and only) Jesus. The classical, i.e. orthodox, christological position has been that both the humble preacher and the eternal, celestial High Priest make up the two essential sides of the christological coin. The implications of Chalcedon are still being worked out.

An important question is whether these implications must be worked out within a Hellenistic metaphysical framework. How might Chalcedon “sound” within the thought world of the 21st century? How might “truly God and truly human” be understood in terms of a scientific cosmology, an evolutionary anthropology, a budding science of astrobiology? For this author these are the questions for which he hopes to sketch some preliminary possible answers on the way to new formulations of the identity of Jesus (christology) in view of ultimate pluralism.

The identity of Jesus and ultimate pluralism are the two poles of this investigation. Although the author has chosen the title “The Identity of Jesus the Christ in View of Ultimate Pluralism,” an equally appropriate title might be “Ultimate Pluralism in the Light of Jesus the Christ.” (1) If the identity of Jesus is “relativized” by the possibility of ET realities, i.e. his identity as *related to* such possible realities, then the opposite is also an essential aspect of the author’s intention: ultimate pluralism is “relativized,” related to the light of Jesus the Christ.

Jesus and E.T. ~ a whimsical title to be sure. Where will the pursuit of both lead us as we seek to relate the one to the other?

Ultimate Pluralism

Our worldview has changed dramatically since the days of antiquity. What has not changed interestingly is the basis upon which human beings construct a worldview. That basis was and is *observation*. The worldviews of antiquity as well as the modern age are both based on what people have observed. What has changed is the power and extent of our observational abilities. Both the poet of Genesis 1 and the theoretical physicist and scientific cosmologist of the present construct a worldview based on their observations. In this sense the ancients were also “empiricists” in constructing their three-tiered worldview by observing the earth, the seas and the heavens. “Heaven and earth” was

their designation for what we call the universe. Ptolemy constructed his worldview in the same manner, assuming the earth to be at the center of a cosmos with everything else revolving around it, an assumption which indeed appears to be the case.

The observations (and mathematical calculations) of Copernicus, Kepler, Newton and Galileo brought a significant shift to the observational assumptions of antiquity. The earth was no longer observed to be at the center of things. The more precise observations lead to the inescapable conclusion that the earth (and other planets) revolve around the sun, which it was assumed was at the center of things (heliocentrism). This shift did not occur without protest since such a view seemed to question the central importance of human life and God's self-revelation to human beings. Galileo was put under house arrest by ecclesiastical authorities and it was not until our own time that the successors of those same authorities "rehabilitated" him, recognizing that he was indeed correct in his observations and the church needed to revise its previous worldview in the light of ever newer observations. (Only very gradually have ecclesiastical authorities been willing to accept the results of empirical science and when they do they have the tendency once again to "opt" for something new, not recognizing that the "new" observation will itself one day be "old" and yet again painful revisions and rehabilitations will become necessary. Pope Pius XII "canonized" the Big Bang cosmological theory in 1951 and praised its consistency with the Christian doctrine of creation. It seems only a matter of time until this too will cause some future reevaluation.)

Subsequent human observation led to revisions of the heliocentrism of the renaissance. More precise observations began to show that our sun is also not at the center of things, but indeed simply one of a myriad of stars in our galaxy. In fact our sun is on the periphery of the Milky Way galaxy. Until the beginning of the last century the Milky Way galaxy was considered to be "the universe." More precise observations and concomitant mathematical calculations have shown our galaxy to be only one such among billions of other galaxies in a universe of staggering immensity. And once again the place of the earth and our sun seemed even more peripheral. Human beings and terrestrial reality seemed pushed to the very precipice of cosmic insignificance.

In our day scientists of the largest of the large and the smallest of the small (Einstein and Heisenberg) have as it were joined hands in the quest for a theory of everything, a unification of the forces at work in the universe. This quest is still ongoing, although some tantalizing clues of such a unification have emerged. One such avenue of scientific approach (more mathematical than observational at the present time it seems) is String Theory and the possibility of multiple universes, higher dimensional realities folded into our own observed space-time continuum. Scientists are quick to admit that by definition we cannot observe other universes even as we may posit their theoretical existence. The worldview emerging from the latest developments has indeed not yet become general. At the present our worldview is still bifurcated into the space-time world of Einstein's relativity and the bizarre and often counterintuitive world of Heisenberg/Bohr's quantum mechanics.

This newest shift in observational perspectives has an underlying aspect, which until now was not acknowledged or recognized. Even as the earth and our solar system do not observationally seem to be at the center of the universe, it has also become apparent on the basis of the scientifically uncontested fact of Big Bang cosmology that there *is* no "center" of the universe. Or another way of saying this is that the center is everywhere, including our own galaxy and solar system. The worldview based on current scientific understandings posits an historical universe, i.e. a universe that has a beginning and will have an end. Some twelve or so billion years ago the universe and all that we can observe came into being and grew out of an infinitesimally tiny point of unimaginable density, curvature and heat called a *singularity*. Why this "ur-explosion" occurred no one knows. Out of this singular event everything we can now observe has evolved and continues to evolve, everything – including human beings who are not outside observers but participants in the very thing we observe. Lee Smolin (2) notes: "There is no coherent notion of a view of the universe except that of an observer who is also part of and a participant in that universe." This is simply to say that we must abandon the "notion of a unique and complete view of the universe for a plurality of many different, incomplete views." The other side of this important insight is that what we humans *can*

observe of the universe is just as “objective” as any other view from any other place in the universe even as our observational perspective cannot incorporate those other places.

To summarize: The worldview which currently has a consensus of scientific support is one in which a staggeringly immense universe of a finite age (12-14 billion years) consists of billions of galaxies each of which contains billions of stars, many of which have planetary systems like our own sun. Our own place in this vast array may not be unique at all. We may not be alone.

But then again we – sentient beings who have called ourselves *homo sapiens* - may be alone in the vast reaches of intergalactic space. At the moment we still do not know.

Is there some probability that we are not alone? Many scientists have maintained that there is a probability that we are not alone; in fact Amir D. Aczel argues in his **Probability One: The Book That Proves There Is Life in Outer Space**, that there is a 100% probability (= certainty) that we are *not* alone. Improbable as life may be, Aczel reasons, the fact that life did in fact emerge on earth, that is to say, on one planet at one time, leads logically to the conclusion that life must have emerged at the very least on one other planet at some time. Not all scientists are convinced of the cogency of his reasoning however just as not everyone is convinced of the cogency of Anselm’s ontological proof of the existence of God.

In a moment we will look more closely at the basis of Aczel’s argument, but first we should recall that “the notion of a plurality of inhabited worlds dates back to the dawn of rational thought and scientific inquiry.” (3) The Greek philosopher Epicurus was convinced that there are an infinite number of worlds both like and unlike our own as was the Roman philosopher Lucretius. Aristotle was not so convinced however. Ecclesiastic authorities eventually took the side of Aristotle and, wanting to uphold the universality of Christian revelation, condemned the idea of a plurality of worlds. This stance eventually led to the execution by fire of Giordano Bruno in 1600, who in his book, *De l’infinito*

universo e mondi, argued for the reality of extraterrestrial worlds. The reality of such possible extraterrestrial worlds is to this day still a speculation.

Speculation about ET within the scientific community is differentiated into three aspects of possible extraterrestrial realities: life, intelligence and civilization. Empirical proof of any one of these three would be a scientific sensation even if only the latter two have direct bearing on the topic of this study. We will consider each possibility separately but first we return to the issue of the probability of any ET realities in the universe.

The American astronomer Frank Drake formulated a way to estimate the number of technological civilizations that could exist in the Milky Way. “Each term in the equation represents the probability of some key step in the evolution of such a civilization, and the numbers involved are highly conjectural. These terms are: the average rate of star formation, the fraction of stars that are stable and long-lived, the fraction of ‘good’ stars that have planets, the likely number of such planets that are ‘Earth-like,’ the fraction of Earth-like planets on which life will develop, the fraction of such biospheres that develop intelligence, the fraction of intelligent species that develop technology and, finally, the average lifetime of a technological community. Multiplying all these factors yields a guess for the expected number of communicable civilizations in our galaxy at this time.”

(4) Since all of these estimated factors can be quite divergent, the results of employing the *Drake Equation* will also vary considerably – from a handful or even zero to several million or billion. The most devastating critique of the Drake Equation goes back to the simple but profound question posed by physicist Enrico Fermi: Where is everybody? Even a generous estimate of the factors of the Drake Equation still leaves this question unanswered: If there are so many ET’s out there, where is everybody? Why have we not discovered some positive proof of the existence of ET’s? Up to the present time there have been no verified encounters with extraterrestrial life, intelligence or civilization. Where is everybody?

This question, which has come to be called the “Fermi paradox,” has been dealt with extensively but inconclusively. Again: we just don’t know.

Using the Drake Equation one can, however, differentiate between extraterrestrial life, intelligence and civilization, whose probabilities would be in a descending order, life having the highest probability, intelligence a middle probability and civilization the lowest probability. With the discovery of indisputable evidence of abundant amounts of liquid water on Mars in the past we may well be on the cusp of discovering extraterrestrial life on that planet. If that life can be shown to have evolved independently of life on the planet Earth (e.g. on the basis of a different DNA or perhaps not even based on carbon), the conclusion would be scientifically sensational. It would lend significant support to the assumption that life is a cosmic imperative, i.e. that the universe is constructed in such a way that life is bound to emerge and evolve.

Extraterrestrial life (ETL) alone would have considerable theological consequences even if that life had not (yet) evolved into sentience, intelligence or civilization. It would prove not only that living things are not limited to the planet Earth but that they are probably prevalent throughout the universe. Scientists are still not able to explain how life emerged out of inanimate, inorganic matter, or even if life did so emerge. It's a known fact, of course, that life did emerge on Earth – even in a relatively short period of time, possibly 700 million years after the formation of Earth. In other words terrestrial life has been here almost as long as Earth has been here. This fact adds weight to the presumption that life has emerged elsewhere where conditions were favorable for its emergence.

If the emergence of living things is prevalent in the universe there is some, albeit lower probability that some of these have acquired an advanced stage of complexity to allow for the emergence of sentience and intelligence, ETI. It follows from that that some of these living, intelligent beings have self-organized into civilizations with advanced technologies. The jump from non-living to living, from living to intelligence and from intelligence to civilization is, of course, considerable. In the first instance, the jump from non-living to living is highly unlikely. Fred Hoyle has compared it to a wind blowing through a junkyard and assembling a fully functional jumbo jet! And yet it did happen on

Earth. Its probability is not zero. The further probabilities of the emergence of intelligence and then of civilization are also not zero because they did happen on Earth. That means their probabilities are not zero on other planets. Almost zero is not zero. Even if we object to Aczel's claim to have proven the existence of life in outer space, at the very least we have to allow for its possible existence. And if we allow for its possible existence, we have to allow for its probable development into intelligence and civilization.

What do we make of the extreme unlikelihood of the emergence of living organisms from inorganic material on the one hand and the incomprehensible vastness of inorganic material spread throughout the universe on the other hand? As improbable as the former may be, it seems that, because the latter approaches if it does not reach infinity, and because life has obviously emerged on one planet at the very least, there is a high likelihood of life, intelligence and civilization on other planets in the universe as well.

Additional support for this notion stems from three philosophical principles undergirding the laws of nature which support such an inference. The first is the *principle of uniformity of nature* which simply states that the laws of nature (physical, chemical and biological) are uniform throughout the universe so that the same laws that led to the emergence of life on earth are operative in the emergence of life anywhere in the universe. The second is the *principle of plenitude* which affirms that what is possible in nature tends to be actualized so that "if there is no impediment to the formation of life, life will form." (5) The third principle is called the *Copernican Principle* or the *principle of mediocrity* which asserts that there is "nothing special about the astronomical, geological, physical and chemical circumstances of Earth" (ibid.) so that in all probability there is nothing special about Earth's biology either and one might expect a similar biology elsewhere in the universe. On the basis of all this it seems quite likely that we *homo sapiens* indeed are not alone in the universe. Not alone by a long shot. George V. Coyne, S.J., Director of the Vatican Observatory, has estimated the number of Earthlike planets in the universe to be 10^{17} : "It is important to note the nature of this conclusion. It is based on scientific facts combined with reasonable estimates that are themselves based on scientific facts. Unless our scientific thinking is drastically wrong, this conclusion is

acceptable and merits our further consideration about what it implies: at a minimum the macroscopic physical conditions for life (an Earthlike planet in a ‘habitable zone’ about a solarlike star) exist elsewhere in the universe.” (6)

Where in the world does Jesus the Christ “fit” in this ultimately pluralistic scenario? To repeat Peacocke’s question at the outset: “What can the cosmic significance possibly be of the localized, terrestrial event of the existence of the historical Jesus?” Indeed, his cosmic significance has been maintained and proclaimed from the earliest days of Christianity. Peacocke asks further: “Does not the mere possibility of extraterrestrial life render nonsensical all the superlative claims made by the Christian church about his significance?” Of course, if his significance is less than cosmic, then the claims are nonsensical. Who is Jesus the Christ in view of ultimate pluralism? What light does Jesus the Christ shed on ultimate pluralism?

The Identity of Jesus the Christ

“There was God. And God Was All-That-Was. God’s Love overflowed and God said, ‘Let Other be. And let it have the capacity to become what it might be – and let it explore its potentialities.’”

And there was Other in God, a field of energy, vibrating energy but no matter, space, time and form. Obeying its given laws and with one intensely hot surge of energy – a hot Big Bang – this Other exploded as the universe from a point twelve or so billion years ago in our time, thereby making space.

Vibrating fundamental particles appeared, expanded, and expanded and cooled into clouds of gas, bathed in radiant light. Still the universe went on expanding and condensing into swirling whirlpools of matter and light – a billion galaxies.

Five billion years ago, one star in one galaxy – our Sun – attracted around it matter as planets. One of them was our Earth. On Earth, the assembly of atoms and the temperature became just right to allow water and solid rock to form. Continents and mountains grew and in some wet crevice, or pool, or deep in the sea, just over three billion years ago, some molecules became large and complex enough to make copies of themselves and so the first specks of life.

Life multiplied in the seas, diversifying and becoming more and more complex. Five hundred million years ago, creatures with solid skeletons, the vertebrates, appeared. On land, green plants changed the atmosphere by making oxygen. Then 300 million years ago, certain fish, learned to crawl from the sea and live on the edge of land, breathing that oxygen from the air.

Now life burst into many forms – reptiles and mammals (and dinosaurs) on land, flying reptiles and birds in the air. Over millions of years, the mammals began to develop complex brains that enabled them to learn. Among these were creatures who lived in trees. From these our first ancestors derived and then, only 40,000 years ago, the first men and women appeared. They began to know about themselves and what they were doing – they were not only conscious, but also self-conscious. The first word, the first laugh was heard. The first paintings were made. The first sense of a destiny beyond – with the first signs of hope, for they buried their dead with ritual. The first prayers were made to the One who made All-That-Is-Becoming. The first experience of goodness, beauty, and truth but also of their opposites, for human beings were free.” (7)

Arthur Peacocke’s poetic recapitulation of the epic of evolution and continuous creation incorporates the vocabulary of science and even non-theists could accept most of it as scientific fact. Is Jesus in this scientifically based retelling of the creation story? Many Christians would recognize him right away as that Other which is the overflowing of God’s Love, that “field of energy, vibrating energy,” through which/whom – to use biblical language – “the world was made.”

From the earliest days Christians have seen in Jesus of Nazareth not only a preacher and teacher, not only a healer and prophet, but in fact a unique and intimate expression of divinity itself. To be sure he was a particular human being – one of our own species *homo sapiens* – who lived at a particular time and in a particular place. It was/is the conviction of his followers that he was like us in all ways except in sin. William Placher (8) points out that, even as the earliest Christians were referring to Jesus as God, “it is simplistic just to say, ‘Jesus is God’,” since Jesus himself prayed to God as a reality other than himself. The interplay of the humanity and divinity of Jesus was/is an issue. perhaps *the* issue, which was and is a central focus of Christian theology from the earliest times up to and including the present day. Why is it that this particular human being came to

be seen as a unique and intimate expression of divinity itself? That question, of course, leads into an examination of his life, his deeds and words, as well as the context in which he lived. We have only one way to do that. We have to turn to the literary artifacts the earliest believers have left us, i.e. the New Testament.

“Passages that assert or strongly suggest the divinity of Christ are undeniably less frequent in the New Testament than those asserting or strongly suggesting his humanity. However, the divinity passages tint all the others the way a drop of dye tints a glass of clear water.” (9) This author shares the conviction of Jack Miles that the Gospels taken together are “a genre that combines history, fiction, and fairy tale” (10). They are so to speak a rainbow which we cannot and should not try to unweave to use the Keatsian metaphor. Historical-critical endeavors and sincere efforts to try to uncover “the historical Jesus” are perhaps not without value in themselves even as they will not finally be able clinically and decisively to “untint” the Gospels of the divinity ascribed to Jesus. His recorded deeds and words are indeed tinted in all of the narratives at our disposal. And we have no other narratives. Paul states this quite clearly in 2 Corinthians 5:16 – “even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way.” Indeed, Paul never “knew” him “in that way.” None of us can know him in that way, but only by being “in Christ” and experiencing oneself as a new creation.

Why should these particular narratives be considered of significance to all of our species? Should they be considered significant for other species, even for an extraterrestrial civilization? The combined narratives of the Christian Bible, both Testaments, make such claims repeatedly and emphatically. This scandal of narrative particularity claiming universality is at the heart of our question of Jesus and ET. There are many narratives alongside the Jewish and Christian narratives. By what right does anyone claim that they are more appropriately applicable than other narratives?

Indeed, they may not be more appropriately applicable in the judgment of others. But they are *our* narratives and we have come to see them as uniquely applicable to *our* lives. The Jewish and Christian Bibles are replete with the concept of chosenness; God chooses

a particular people, a particular Son. As Jack Miles says, the God of the Bible is “openly and passionately discriminatory.” The same narratives, however, are also replete with examples deriding and rejecting the *hubris* and exclusivity which not infrequently are concomitant with a sense of being “chosen.” Abraham is only uniquely blessed so that he may *be* a blessing to others. Even in this foundational narrative of chosenness the trajectory is outward toward universality. The subsequent foundational narrative of the Exodus is not exclusive to Israel as Amos 9:7-8 maintains: “Are not you and the Ethiopians all the same to me, children of Israel? ... I brought Israel up from Egypt, oh yes, and the Philistines from Caphtor, and the Arameans from Kir.” The God of the chosen people is also the God of those not chosen and even in a similarly liberating way. New Testament narratives are also full of examples of intentional inclusivity. Jesus is portrayed as reaching out to those outside the boundaries of the chosen and there is explicit reference to the “sheep not of this fold.”

To be sure all of this does not make the scandal of narrative particularity less scandalous, but it does help us to see that the particular in these stories does have a trajectory beyond themselves.

What about Jesus and ET? If Jesus indeed is the Word made flesh, the first-born of all creation, the image of the invisible God, the reflection of God’s glory and the exact imprint of God’s very being, as the New Testament proclaims, then all possible ET worlds were also “made through him,” even as their own narratives might (presumably) articulate this in ways unknown to us. Does this mean that there may be more than one incarnation? After all, as Jack Miles states not without humor: “It is no more beyond God to appear in the form of a man than it is beyond him to appear in the form of a bush.” (11) There is nothing in the sacred narratives of the Bible which rules out the idea of multiple incarnations. On the other hand we could very well agree with the Vatican’s top astronomer, George V. Coyne, S.J., who confesses how limited we necessarily are in our ability to deal with such questions. “Surely God is completely free to choose his methods.” (12) Incarnation may be only one of the divine “methods” to deal with creation. Indeed, God chose a particular “method” with and for us. Can we

doubt that God has chosen or will chose a particular “method” for ET beings? And just as our narratives of particularity with a universal trajectory can include them, so one may hope that their narratives, unique to their own given situation, will also include us.

The Christian doctrine of the incarnation, as it has come to us through the conciliar formulations of Nicea, Constantinople and, finally and definitively, Chalcedon, is not so much a metaphysic as it is a continuing reflection on the poetic, narrative art of earlier parts of the Christian Bible. The poetic license which inspired the ancient sage verbally to depict wisdom as a separate reality from God but intimately and uniquely related to divinity is the same poetic license which inspired the author of the prologue to the Gospel of John in which the word has become flesh in Jesus the Christ. Of course, the texts of the creeds and councils are written in prose, as is the text of this study. But this prose is based on poetry and artistic narrative, albeit sacred poesy and sacred narrative. Keeping this in mind, namely, that all the material we have available while inquiring into the identity of Jesus consists of sacred poetry and artistic narrative, we turn now to the one of the main things in the narrative which is indisputably historic fact, the death of Jesus.

The bare bones credal statement (Apostles’ Creed) about the identity of Jesus simply affirms that he was born, died, rose again and ascended into heaven. Indisputably historical are his birth and death. But even then it was an unusual birth (of the Virgin Mary) and an unusual death (an atoning sacrifice). Within the framework of the sacred narrative of the Christian Bible Jesus is God acting as a human being. Again taking the metaphor of Jack Miles, everything he does and says is “tinted” with divinity, so also his death. The traditional understanding of the atonement has come under much criticism lately, in particular from feminist theologians. Indeed the image of Abraham’s near sacrifice of Isaac is repugnant to much of contemporary sensibility as is the idea of an angry God being appeased by the sacrifice of the divine Son. William Placher has rightly observed, however, that behind such criticism may well lie a denial of the divinity of Christ, with which all of the New Testament narratives are “tinted.” Jesus’ death is God’s death. Friedrich von Spee, seventeenth century German Jesuit and poet, expressed it poignantly in his Holy Saturday Hymn, *O Traurigkeit: O große Not, Gott selbst ist tot.*

(O great destitution, God himself is dead.) William Placher expresses this quite effectively:

“The passion narratives operate on two levels. On one, they tell the story of a brave, frightened, lonely young man who is killed by powerful people and institutions in his society. On the other, they recount how the Son of God saves humankind. ... (The Gospels) show Christ doing divine things in a human way and human things in a divine way.” (13)

Putting this in a different way we might say: the death of Jesus on the cross is God’s abdication of all claims to omnipotence in the conventional sense of raw power. Jack Miles unfolds this insight with great precision in the masterful second volume to his Pulitzer Prize winning, *God, A Biography*. We have already referred to and quoted from his *Christ, A Crisis in the Life of God*, several times. Although Miles does not make an explicit connection between the Passion narratives and the Book of Job, which plays a central role in his first book, there seems to be a very close connection in the mind of this author. The fact of evil which is much more than a philosophical problem for speculation cries out for some divine answer. The answer, the *dike* of theodicy, is that God’s being is one of com-*passion*, of *suffering with* all those who suffer. The divine power is in the first instance the power of love, a love willing and able to suffer along with those who suffer. This insight, if accepted, means giving up one of the traditional divine attributes, impassibility, the notion that God cannot suffer or change. Arthur Peacocke has also pointed this out (14). The rejection of the notion of the impassibility of God is also a component in much so-called “process” theology, which is indebted to the philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead, who understands God as “the great companion – the fellow sufferer who understands.” (15)

To sum up: the identity of Jesus the Christ is nothing more and nothing less than the whole corpus of sacred narrative (Old and New Testaments) which from a Christian perspective are all *about* him. The sacred narratives and prose of the Bible take it for granted that Jesus the Christ has cosmic significance since indeed it was “through him” that all things (the universe) were made. If this were not the case, interest in his historical person would most likely never even have evolved. If through him all things were made,

then there obviously are no extraterrestrial realities - life, intelligence or civilization – which have no connection to him. Should ET realities be discovered in the future, we should expect that in addition to any scientific discoveries which could flow from such a discovery, we would also perceive the poetic Sophia/Logos at work in them. Does this fact rule out some other divine “dispensation” which may be part of the remembered and cohesion-creating communal life of alien ET beings? By no means. In fact our own faith convictions may be not only challenged but strengthened by the communal insights of others. This certainly is already true for participants in the interfaith dialogue *on earth*. Can we seriously doubt that it would not be the case in a possible dialogue with ET beings who may indeed be considerably more advanced than we are - not only technologically but spiritually. Indeed, Christian faith would be relativized in that it would have to be related to another communal experience of the numinous and the sacred. Such relativization has nothing to do with “watering down.” It is simply what persons of faith have always done throughout the ages. Had persons of faith not done that, there is little reason to believe that there would be a Christian faith community today. Who is Jesus the Christ in view of ultimate pluralism? The same, yesterday, today and tomorrow. What light can Jesus the Christ shed on ultimate pluralism? Surely, only the light that is already there.

Chalcedon for the 21st Century – Sketch of a Theology of Nature

It is plainly obvious at this juncture that the author of this inquiry is far from wanting to depart from Nicean/Chalcedonian orthodoxy. It is also quite apparent that the question of ultimate pluralism can best be considered from a position of what usually is called a high Christology. At the very least an adequate case can be made for maintaining that Nicean/Chalcedonian orthodoxy is a consequent and consistent unfolding - in prose forms - of the Sophia/Logos poesy and artistic narratives of both Testaments of sacred scriptures. It is now time to ask whether the metaphysical framework of the creedal formulations needs to be “translated” into the 21st century. The question is a rhetorical one. Our worldview today is so obviously a different one than the worldview of

Athanasius and the Cappadocian Fathers. Not that we cannot still learn from them. But we learn from them as we adapt to our own time and place as they did to theirs.

“God of God, Light of Light, true God of true God,” are the words circumscribing the identity of Jesus in the Nicene Creed. Chalcedon goes further, in explicit articulation of the humanity of Jesus, and states:

“We all with one voice confess our Lord Jesus Christ ... truly God and truly human, the same consisting of a reasonable soul and a body, of one substance with the Father as touching the Godhead, of one substance with us as touching the humanity ... to be acknowledged in two natures, without confusion, without change, without division, without separation.”
(16)

We asked at the outset: How might Chalcedon “sound” within the thought world of the 21st century? How might “truly God and truly human” be understood in terms of a scientific cosmology, an evolutionary anthropology, a budding science of astrobiology? By the very nature of the complexity and scope of these issues this concluding section of our study will have to be limited to a sketch. A possibly fruitful avenue of approach is a new theological “specialty,” which Ian Barbour has called a “theology of nature.” (17) Barbour, recipient of the Templeton Prize for work in the interdisciplinary area of science and theology, distinguishes a possible theology of nature from what has been called “natural theology.” The former “does not start from science ... but from a religious tradition based on religious experience and historical revelation” and then “should draw from broad features of science that are widely accepted.” (18) It is incontestable that some of the traditional branches of theology in general, e.g. the doctrines of creation and human nature, touch upon aspects of reality which are also investigated by scientists. What might a theology of nature say about the identity of Jesus in view of ultimate pluralism? Barbour himself has asked the question within the framework of dealing with the significance of humanity and has given a preliminary answer:

“Life on other Planets. Planets are so numerous that if even a small fraction of them are habitable, life could exist in many stellar systems. Observations with the Hubble telescope in 1999 found evidence of another

star with more than one planet. Extraterrestrial intelligence has been the subject of many science fiction films, from *E.T.* and *Star Trek* to *Contact*. The possibility of beings superior to us, living in more advanced civilizations, is a further warning against human pride. It also calls into question exclusive claims concerning God's revelation in Christ. Here we can recall that even on our planet the work of the *Logos*, the eternal Word, was not confined to its expression in Christ. If that Word is active in continuing creation throughout the cosmos, we can assume that it will also have revealed itself as the power of redemption at other points in space and time, in ways appropriate to the forms of life existing there. Our image of God must be commensurate with the cosmic scale of creation and redemption." (19)

The issues that emerge from the present study, which a theology of nature would want to take up and explore further, might be the following, using Barbour's own schematic delineation in his work already cited:

1. *Science and Religion in general.* This area of a theology of nature would deal with both of these human endeavors to delineate differences and explore possible tangents where both meet. The age during which science and religion were inimical endeavors has (thankfully) passed (with the exception of isolated "creationist" debates which can no longer be taken with intellectual seriousness). Here is the place for a *prolegomena of a theology of nature* in which parameters are set and mutual respect and accountability are the goals sought.
2. *Astronomy and Creation.* This area contains a wealth of issues from the Big Bang theory of the origin of the universe, the nature of matter and energy, the origin and meaning of organic (living) things, to what has been called the *Anthropic Principle*. Big Bang cosmology is generally accepted by scientists today, but more recent scientific inquiries based on multi-dimensional planes or "strings" suggests a possible cyclical, never-ending dance of creation. (Cf. Michael D. Lemonick, "Before the Big Bang" in *Discover*, Vol. 25, No. 2, pp. 34-41) The *Anthropic Principle*, which can be stated in a stronger or weaker form, affirms that "what we can expect to observe must be restricted by the conditions necessary for our presence as observers." (20) This principle has very obvious points of contact with a Christian anthropology, with Christology and the doctrine

of the incarnation. With regard to ET a theology of nature would deal with possible human-like aliens as well as alien-like humans.

3. *The Implications of Quantum Physics.* The bizarre, often counter-intuitive world of the ultra-small, the sub-nuclear realm of particles offers a rich field indeed for a theology of nature. Calling into question some of the “sacred cows” of traditional science, this whole area is fraught with theological potentiality. Some theologians (not all of them Christian) have already begun to explore this realm and further exploration from the perspective of a theology of nature has no small potential.
4. *Evolution and Continuing Creation.* The old war of Religion versus Darwinism is over (except for those few last hold-outs of fundamentalists). Even the present Pope has allowed that Darwinism is more than simply theory. This area of a theology of nature would take up the issues of complexity and self-organization, the concept of information (DNA) and evolutionary design. If evolution is a cosmic fact – and not simply an earthly reality – a theology of nature would see in it the creative opus operandi of God.
5. *Genetics, Neuroscience and Human Nature.* A theology of nature would deal with issues of sociobiology, genetic determinism and human freedom as well as the continuing dualisms of body/soul and brain/mind. The issues in this area are also preeminently theological issues: sin, love (altruism), forgiveness and redemption. A sizable part of a theology of nature would deal with anthropology, in particular as it relates to Christology.
6. *God and Nature.* Finally a theology of nature would take up anew the traditional theological subject of nature and grace, but from a new perspective. Here also the strengths and weaknesses of theism in general would be dealt with. God as Creator/Initiator would be explored and God’s glory as Designer of self-organizing processes would come to expression. In particular nature as an aspect of the self-limitation of God and the passibility of God – process theology – would come to expression.

“Jesus and E.T.” are component parts of each of these six sub-divisions in a theology of nature, which still awaits thorough treatment. In many ways “truly God, truly human” could come to a new articulation which makes sense to people of the 21st century.

A Poetic Conclusion

Christ in the Universe

A Poem by Alice Meynell (1847-1922)

[quoted by Arthur Peacocke in Steven Dick (ed.), *Many Worlds*, 2000, p. 114-115]

With this ambiguous earth
His dealings have been told us. These abide:
The signal to a maid, the human birth,
The Lesson and the young Man crucified.

But not a star of all
The innumerable hosts of stars has heard
How he administered this terrestrial ball.
Our race have kept their Lord's entrusted Word.

No planet knows that this
Our wayside planet, carrying land and wave,
Love and life multiplied, and pain and bliss,
Bears, as chief treasure, one forsaken grave.

Nor, in our little day,
May his devices with the heavens be guessed,
His pilgrimage to thread the Milky Way,
Or his bestowals there be manifest.

But, in the eternities,
Doubtless we shall compare together, hear
A million alien Gospels, in what guise
He trod the Pleiades, the Lyre, the Bear.

Notes

- 1 The author is indebted to Professor Alexander McKelway for the suggestion to deal with the subject at hand by turning things around and asking the question, *What light does Jesus the Christ shed on ultimate pluralism?* Alexander McKelway was theological consultant at CTI's region west gathering of the Pastor-Theologian Program in October 2003 and the author is grateful to him for many insights.

- 2 Lee Smolin, "Our Relationship to the Universe," in Steven Dick, ed., **Many Worlds: The New Universe, Extraterrestrial Life and the Theological Implications**, Templeton Foundation Press, Philadelphia and London, 2000, p. 80.
- 3 Paul Davies, **Are We Alone? Philosophical Implications of the Discovery of Extraterrestrial Life**, Basic Books, New York, 1995, p. 2.
- 4 Ibid., p. 139.
- 5 Ibid., p. 22.
- 6 George V. Coyne, S.J., "The Evolution of Intelligent Life on Earth and Possibly Elsewhere: Reflections from a Religious Tradition," in Steven Dick, ed., **Many Worlds: The New Universe, Extraterrestrial Life and the Theological Implications**, Templeton Foundation Press, Philadelphia and London, 2000, p. 180.
- 7 Arthur Peacocke, "The Challenge and Stimulus of the Epic of Evolution to Theology," in Steven Dick, ed., **Many Worlds: The New Universe, Extraterrestrial Life and the Theological Implications**, Templeton Foundation Press, Philadelphia and London, 2000, p. 89f.
- 8 William C. Placher, **Jesus the Savior: The Meaning of Jesus Christ for Christian Faith**, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, 2001, p. 15.
- 9 Jack Miles, **Christ: A Crisis in the Life of God**, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 2001, p. 282.
- 10 Ibid., p. 283.
- 11 Ibid., p. 11.
- 12 George V. Coyne, S.J., Op. Cit., p. 187.
- 13 William C. Placher, Op. Cit. p. 115.
- 14 Arthur Peacocke, Op. Cit. p. 108.
- 15 William C. Placher, Op. Cit. p. 129.
- 16 Ibid., p. 49.
- 17 Ian G. Barbour, **When Science Meets Religion: Enemies, Strangers or Partners?**, Harper, San Francisco, 2000, p. 31-34 i.a.
- 18 Ibid, p. 31.
- 19 Ibid., p. 62f.
- 20 Ibid., p. 58.

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