

Human Uniqueness and Christian Belief  
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“Unique” is a fascinating word, laden with ambiguity. It is one of those strange words that has almost opposite meanings. Even more peculiarly, unique is a word that never strictly applies. The *American Heritage Dictionary* has one of its longest editorial notes attached to the word. The panel of experts, who are asked to rule on problematic uses of a word, are obviously frustrated by the seemingly illogical way that “unique” is constantly used.

Generations of grammar teachers have insisted that there can be no comparatives modifying “unique.” Something cannot be very unique or more unique. A thing is either unique or it is not unique. And yet, more often than not, people use qualifiers of comparison before “unique.”

I think popular speech shows a realization of the strangeness of the claim to be unique. The usual way of speaking seems at first glance to be loose, sloppy, or illogical. But there is an insight in this popular use of “unique” that opens up the contrasting meanings of “unique.”

The root meaning of “unique” is to be different from others, to be not equal. While there is only one way to be equal or the same, there are literally endless ways to be unequal. In a spectrum of inequality, uniqueness puts no cap on the range of being different from. The unique is different from every other thing, different in all respects.

Does that simply mean that a unique thing is the only one of its class? Sometimes that is assumed to be the meaning of unique. But “unique” is not usually employed for that purpose. We simply say that something is one of a kind. People do not get confused or fight over that statement.

The claim of uniqueness does not stop with kind; it has no in-built restraints. It asserts different from all others in every way. Is that possible? Can an event, a thing, or a person be unique? If a thing is a thing at all, it shares a common note with other things; otherwise it would not be a thing. I think that people sense that fact when they say that something is “very unique,” “more unique,” or “most unique.” What they mean is that the thing is extraordinarily different from other things to which it might be compared.

The very unique thing is different in so many ways and to such a degree as to approach (total) uniqueness. “More unique” means that something is more nearly unique. As the term is used in popular speech and in much

scholarly writing, “unique” is about a process of increasing differentiation. Far from being a term that lacks comparativeness, it always implies comparison, sometimes to its own prior condition and usually to other things.

This first point about unique—to be different from others by a process of continuing but never finished differentiation—leads to a second point. The process of increasing differentiation can go in one of two directions: toward increasing exclusion or toward increasing inclusion. Something can be (more nearly) unique by having fewer and fewer notes in common with others. In the opposite direction, something can become (more nearly) unique by having more and more notes in common with others.

In the sequence wxyz, xyz, yz, z, the last element, z, can be called the most nearly unique in this set of four elements. It shares only the note z with the other three elements; it is the most different of the four. We cannot say it is simply or totally unique because there could be z1, z2, z3, z4. The element z is divisible further. Whatever has been claimed to be indivisible has turned out to be divisible into subunits. Electrons are more nearly unique than atoms.

In the opposite direction, a thing can become more nearly unique by a process of increasing inclusion. In the sequence a, ab, abc, abcd, the fourth element, abcd, can be called the most unique of the set. It is different from all the others by including all of them. Abc is more unique than a or ab, but abcd is still more nearly unique. However, abcd is not simply and totally unique. The sequence suggests the possibility of an abcde, abcdef, or abcdefg, the last being the most unique in the set. While human history continues, no thing could be completely unique, inclusive of every other thing.

I am not merely proposing a logical hypothesis of what “unique” could mean. I have examined many hundreds of examples in ordinary speech and scholarly writing for how the word is actually used. The usage breaks down fairly evenly between these two meanings.

The first meaning may seem to be the obvious, logical, and usual sense: uniqueness is simply a matter of excluding sameness. However, when human beings are the reference for the term, the second meaning of uniqueness is usually implied. The first meaning logically applies to a world of objects outside one another in space. Things are more nearly unique as they share fewer commonalities. But the second meaning is needed to describe the openness of the human being.

The important uniqueness of the human is its possibility for an ever increasing openness to others. All animals are open to the world around them; mammals are individuals that are particularly receptive and responsive to their environment. Humans carry the process further by

being open to the whole world. As Theodosius Dobzhansky put it, “All species are unique, but humans are uniquest.” Humans in their uniqueness are unlike every other animal by being similar to all of them, a recapitulation and an embodiment of the full texture of life. As the nineteenth-century writer, Erigena, put it, “the humans are the workshop of creation.” Human life is wondrous in its complexity and incomprehensible to itself.

A unique living being is one that suffers or feels the world. A human as the uniquest being extends the meaning of “world.” Human uniqueness includes empathy for other sentient animals whose suffering of the world includes pain. Understandably, human empathy is the greatest toward the human’s own kind. The humans as the uniquest animals are in the world with their whole selves. Reason is not a power above animal nature; at its best, reason is the transformative power of the whole self from within.

Some environmental writers argue that if only humans would recognize that they are an insignificant speck in the universe, they would stay in their place of equality with other species. The problem is that in relation to the power to destroy other species the humans never were equal and their power now has become enormously magnified. The attempt to downgrade the human goes in the wrong direction. Humility is not engendered by people being told that the world is very old and very big. Humility (“of the earth”) is born of the recognition by each human being of its place in the human community.

Human respect for the uniqueness and greatness of each human being is needed to restrain humans from using violence against each other. Violence toward other humans inevitably spills over to violence against other earth-mates. Conversely, if each human being were seen as uniquely important, an attitude of respect would extend to what the human being is related to, that is, to everything. In Christian terms, the humans are created a little less than the angels; they are the priests of all creation.

### Jesus, Christ

The meaning of unique as the human openness to the other has its roots in Christian reflection on Jesus of Nazareth that resulted in the coining of the term person. Christians draw a story line out of the Old Testament that differs from the Jewish reading of the Tanakh because Christians read the Old Testament through the New Testament. That does not mean Christians are wrong; all interpretation involves the perspective of the interpreter.

In this case, the promise of a Messiah is given greater prominence by Christian interpretation leading up to Jesus of Nazareth, who is declared to be the Messiah. Do the Christians have a good case? The fathers of the church tried to show that Jesus was the expected one, but they had to admit that he was not exactly what had been expected. An examination of uniqueness is one way to bring out the fact that acceptance of Jesus unites Judaism and Christianity, but belief in the Christ is what divides the two religions.

For purposes of this discussion, one must distinguish between the

terms Jesus and Christ. Jesus is indisputably the name of a first-century Jew, who is proclaimed in the gospel. “Christ” is a title, originally a translation of the Hebrew word Messiah, but one that quickly took on a complex philosophical meaning. Jews can have a conversation about Jesus if they are inclined to do so. Jews do not discuss “Christ” either because they do not share the belief or because they do not know what is being discussed. The ambiguity in referring to “Jesus Christ” also causes confusion among Christians.

I do not think Christians should or will give up referring to “Jesus Christ” in their liturgy. However, in discussing a claim of uniqueness there has to be a clear understanding that “Jesus Christ” is not the first and last name of someone. The question “Is Jesus Christ unique?” can only be answered by first breaking the question into two parts: “Is Jesus unique?” and “Is Christ unique?”

*Is Jesus Unique?* The answer to that question is easy, perhaps too easy. For anyone who is aware that “unique” is an adjective that describes every human being, the answer is an impatient yes. A writer involved in Christian–Buddhist dialogue writes “that Jesus is unique is obvious even to Buddhists, just as a Christian would hardly question the uniqueness of Gautama. Is not each of us unique?” The answer to the last question is yes, but uniqueness is not a simple fact of perception.

The uniqueness of the person emerged slowly in history. Forces from Buddhism to Greek philosophy contributed to the uniqueness of the person. By any measure, the Jews have made a big contribution to this emergence. Jesus of Nazareth is one of the most important individuals through whom the idea of unique person was established. On almost everyone’s scale, Jesus of Nazareth is one of history’s most unique persons. Christians have a right and a duty to emphasize that Jesus was a very unique person.

Some Christian writers try to downplay the claim to uniqueness because they see it as opposed to the ecumenical. I would say, on the contrary, that Christians have not emphasized enough the uniqueness of Jesus. Most Christians cannot appreciate Jesus’ uniqueness because they do not know Jewish history well enough. A person’s uniqueness is formed out of all the circumstances of his or her life.

One can therefore affirm Jesus as very unique only as one appreciates the Jewish people, the land, and the time that formed the context of Jesus’ life. Jesus arose out of a long tradition in ancient Israel. As was true of the great innovators before him, the presence of his person was the meeting place of past and future, the renewal of the covenant between God and his people. Jesus gathered up disparate

strands of Jewish thought into a coherent whole; he was exorcist, charismatic healer, and prophet.

Jesus was a Jew who was in dispute with Judaism. That stance was not unusual for a Jew of those times, nor indeed for a Jew of today. He argued with the Pharisees because his teaching was so similar to theirs. He was perhaps at the liberal end of pharisaic opinion, arguing for the spirit of the law as more important than the performance of every letter of the law. Nearly all reformers try to interiorize morality, thereby simplifying external codes. But if one reads the Gospel through the lens of justice for the poor, then Jesus is not seen to be like a nineteenth-century liberal but an apocalyptic reformer who warns that judgment is at hand.

*Is Christ Unique?* The answer to this question is more complicated than that of Jesus' uniqueness. Jesus is the name of someone who is obviously very unique. "Christ" is the name of something—a title, an ideal, an idea, a hope. "Christ" as a title is very unique in an exclusivistic sense; it is under Christian control. Somewhere on earth someone may be saying "I am Christ," but no major religious group competes with Christianity for ownership of the term. There is nothing wrong or surprising about this fact. Each religious group uses language uniquely its own to define who they are.

The statement that "Christ is the unique way of salvation" is not a universal truth of philosophy. It is a confession of faith that defines a Christian. The statement is true for Christians, or at least it becomes true as they engage in acts of prayer and service. Outside of Christianity, the statement that "Christ is the unique way of salvation" lacks sufficient meaning to be either true or false.

This exclusivistic uniqueness of "Christ" should not be offensive to others who do not speak this language. A problem only arises for both Christian and non-Christian when "Christ" is interchanged with "Jesus." From the earliest period of Christianity, there has been a danger that Jesus the Jew would be obscured by reference to Christ. Christianity then becomes a philosophical system built around the idea of Christ and other things that of their nature are exclusive.

That danger is considerably increased by the strange phrase "Christ event" which originated in twentieth-century Christian writing. Karl Barth constantly refers to revelation as a "unique event." But it was Oscar Cullmann's *Christ and Time* that popularized the phrase "Christ event." The book had clarity and precision, but that was part of its problem: "Christ" became mathematically situated. In the book's second part, "The Unique Character of the Christ deed at the Midpoint," the author repeatedly refers to the "Christ event," which happened once and once for all.

In later editions of the book, Cullmann played down the location of the Christ event at the midpoint. But the bigger problem was that he laid out history as a series of points, and one of those points was where the Christ event was located. That image creates insuperable problems in trying to relate Christianity to the rest of human history. History after the Christ event becomes a “mopping up” operation after the war has been won.

The illogical but dynamic-sounding “Christ event” spread throughout much of Christian writing. Wolfhart Pannenberg, while very critical of Cullmann, also uses the phrase “Christ event.” He, too, has to ask what happens “after Christ”? There can be only one Christian answer to that question: nothing happens after Christ. For Christians, the revelation of God is summed up “in Christ, the unique revelation of God.” That belief makes sense only if “Christ” can refer to a further realization of person and community in the future and not simply to an event in the past.

One test for a Christian understanding of the uniqueness of Christ is the relation of “Christ” to Jewish history both past and present. The meaning of the idea of Christ is in part shared with Judaism. The announcement that Jesus is the Messiah or the Christ would have made little sense outside of a Jewish context. But very quickly the term Christ went on a fascinating journey, absorbing into itself the meanings of *logos* from Greek philosophy. In contrast, the term Messiah remains to this day a Jewish term.

Today the term Christ overlaps but is not coextensive with Messiah. That connection is enough for Christianity to be indissolubly tied to its Jewish roots. If it could be recognized that “Christians are right in asserting that Jesus is the Christ; and Jews are right in asserting that Jesus is not the Messiah,” then a fruitful conversation might be possible. Even within Christian language, it is possible to say that Jews are correct in awaiting a Messiah or messianic age still to come. If Christians would make this distinction between Christ and Messiah, it would allow Jews the chance to appreciate Jesus as one of their own, the rabbi from Nazareth.

This conversation might also reorient Christian thinking to the Christ of the present and the hoped-for Christ of the future. From the beginning, Christians have tried to link Christ with the whole world. Their *idea* of Christ was intended to be open to all others by a process of inclusion. But the actual realization of such inclusiveness depends on the proper linking of “Christ” with Jesus, with the Jewish people, and with the actions of the Christian church.

When Christians say that “Christ is unique,” that should signify they

intend to work toward a greater inclusiveness, a more genuine community, than the world has yet seen. The term Christ, without ceasing to be a title for a first-century Jew—indeed precisely as a title attached to that person in that community—foreshadows the concrete realization of a world of unique persons in peace with each other and with nonhuman life.

The Christian church can lay claim to having brought about a partial embodiment of that human community. The Christian task is to get on with the realization of a greater uniqueness. Jesus as the Christ, or as the beginning of the fullness of Christ, embodies divine activity and human response. The exclusive uniqueness of the term Christ and the inclusive uniqueness of Jesus combine to form a liturgical formula that realistically acknowledges the limits of the church, together with its openness to the future.