

JESUS CHRIST AS A STUMBLING BLOCK IN INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE?

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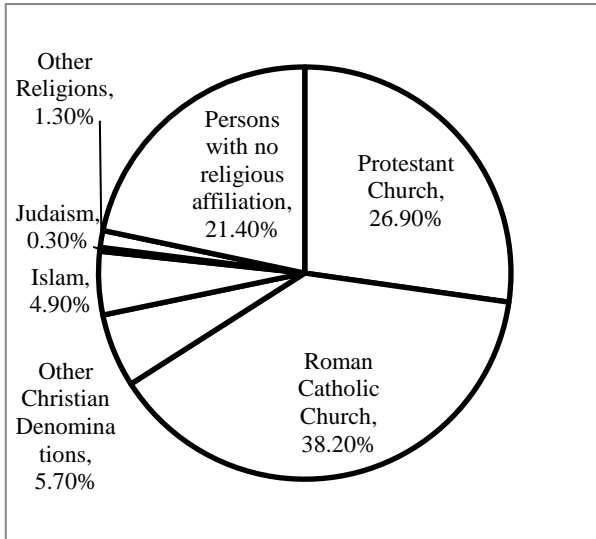
***Abstract:** I start my reflections with a view at the situation of religious plurality in Switzerland and in the city of Basel and give a brief sketch of the development towards a “theology of religions” during the last decades. Then I focus on the question of how to understand the salvific relevance of Jesus Christ in relation to other religions. Is Jesus Christ a, or rather the stumbling block in interreligious dialogue? I suggest to understand the doctrine of the human and the divine nature of Jesus Christ in terms of two relations – the relation to humanity and the relation to God – and relating those two relations by the concept of representation. That allows to conceive of Jesus Christ as representing God’s creative and salvific presence in a most authentic but not exclusive way. That understanding leads to the expectation that also in non-Christian traditions occurrences of God’s grace are to be found*

Key Word: Jesus Christ, Stumbling block, Interreligious Dialogue, Theology of religions

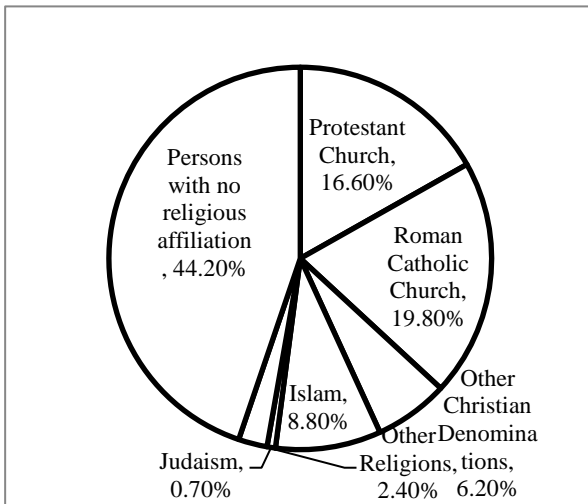
I. Religious Plurality

In Europe religious pluralism has increased in the last decades, mostly due to labour migration but also due to refugees coming from Syria, Iraq and African countries. On the other hand, the mainline churches are in decline. They are losing members, mainly in the big cities. Let me give you a very brief overview of the religious landscape in Switzerland as a whole and in the city of Basel.

Religious Plurality in Switzerland (2012)
(Source: Statistisches Bundesamt Bern)



Religious Plurality in Basel (2012)
(Source: Statistisches Bundesamt Bern)



For churches, the increasing religious plurality raises the question of how to constructively shape interreligious relations and how to view such relations theologically. Due to the presence of considerable percentages of Muslims in many European countries, the definition of the relationship with Islam plays an especially important role.

II. Approaches to a Theology of Religions

From the 1960s onwards, remarkable changes in the field of interreligious relationships have occurred. "Dialogue" (rather than apologetics or mission) became the paradigm for determining the relations to other religions. That paradigm shaped the *praxis* of interreligious encounter, but a *theology* of interreligious dialogue was not developed yet.

With the Second Vatican Council, the *Roman Catholic Church* going ahead and presenting in "Nostra Aetate", the declaration on the Relation of the Church with Non-Christian Religions; an approach to a theology of non-Christian religions began. Since then several documents on this array of questions were issued, whilst many churches of the Reformation in Europe are still in the process of establishing their position.

That they were and are so hesitant in dealing with the challenges is due to practical as well as theological reasons. The *historical-practical reasons* lie in the fact that Protestant Christianity has for centuries been located mainly in countries of Central and Northern Europe, as well as the USA. There was little inclination to engage in interreligious relations. It was considered to be a question of mission.

The *theological reasons* lie, among others, in the focus on Christ ("solus Christus") and the Bible ("sola Scriptura") in the churches of the Reformation. Protestant theology emphasized the

particularity of the revelation in Christ. That seemed to leave little space for assuming that God's word and spirit reach beyond the proclamation of that word. Since the 1980s, intensive debates on those issues were held in the individual Protestant Churches, in the "Lutheran World Federation" (LWF), in the "World Communion of Reformed Churches" (WCRC) and in the "World Council of Churches" (WCC). The General Assembly of the WCC in Canberra in 1991 declared:

The Bible bears witness to God as the ruler over all nations and peoples, whose love and concern is extended to all of humankind. In the covenant with Noah we see a covenant of God with all creation. We recall the covenant which God made with Abraham and Israel. In the history of this covenant we are promised that we will recognize God through Jesus Christ. We are also aware that others bear witness to having experienced God in another way. We are witnesses to the truth that salvation is in Jesus Christ, and we are also open to the witness of others who encounter the truth differently.

What was called for is a "culture of dialogue" as a way of reconciliation, a dialogue which overcomes ignorance and intolerance.

Recognition of the non-Christian religions was further expressed by those who participated in a consultation which took place at the WCC sub-division, 'Dialogue with People of Living Religions' in Baar, Switzerland (9-15 January 1990). There the plurality of religions was understood as the "result of the many ways in which God has communicated himself to peoples and nations". In many ways, too, believers have "found redemption, totality, illumination, divine guidance, rest and liberation". God's redeeming mystery "has been communicated and expressed in many different ways which unfold as God's plan moves towards its fulfilment.

There may be ways which we do not know for those outside the flock (John 10.6) if they live faithfully and truly in their particular

circumstances and within the framework of the religious traditions which guide and inspire them”.

Such statements on the fundamental theological questions of interreligious dialogue, however, frequently caused passionate debates within the churches. These debates disclosed the need for clarification. The individual churches meet the described challenges in very different ways. But so far they did not speak with one voice as the Roman Catholic Church does. Some of them issued theological statements on that topic, others did not. The statements cover a variety of positions. So in the “Community of Protestant Churches in Europe” (CPCE) there has risen the desire to work out a paper which would try to formulate a common position.

In 2012, the General Assembly of the CPCE decided to launch a study process on the subject of “Plurality of Religions” and installed a working group to draft a paper. There is a committee working on it which I have to honour and feel the burden to preside it. The draft will be sent to the churches in Europe and they will discuss it. After that process of consultation, we hope to finalize the paper so that the next General Assembly of the “Community of Protestant Churches in Europe” which will be held in 2018 in Basel would hopefully accept it.

The paper starts with a rather empirical description of “religions in Europe”. It then gives an overview of the documents issued by different European Protestant churches on that topic. In the following part, a theological foundation is laid: it is centred on the *radical grace* of the Triune God as it is revealed in Jesus Christ. The last part reflects on the practical consequences and ways of living together in religiously plural societies.

I am not intending to present the content of that paper to you now, but enter from that starting point to a theological discussion

which played and plays an important role in the debates within the working group and which is a crucial – perhaps the most crucial issue in the so called “theology of religions” as it is recently discussed. At the heart of that discussion is the question, on whether Christianity's insistence on the uniqueness of the revelation of divine salvation through in Jesus Christ allows a theological acknowledgement for other religions? Is Jesus Christ *a*, or rather *the* stumbling block in interreligious dialogue? Does it not rather lead, inescapably and necessarily, to exclusivity towards other religions, whereby any theological significance of other religions is denied?

I will discuss that question not in reference to others religions' (I mainly think of Judaism and Islam) rejection of the Christian understanding of Christ, but in reference to the *inner-Christian* discourse on Christology. I focus on that crucial *theological* question, knowing that there are many other important stumbling blocks for interreligious dialogue, theological as well as practical.

If Christ is “the only” or “the only begotten” (*monogenaes*) Son of God, (John 1:14; 3:16,18); if the *Logos* has become flesh in him alone; if the title “vere Deus” (“true God”) can be applied uniquely to him – then there can be no salvific relation to the Divine which is *not* mediated through him. It should follow then that, *the* religion which bears Christ's name and reveals and mediates this unique relationship between the Divine and the human is the only true religion. I would like to explore the possibility of a Christological approach which does not inevitably lead to such a devaluation of other religions and their truth claims.

In the New Testament as well as in Christianity's theological history and devotional records, we find Christological and/or soteriological statements which have indeed been taken as justifications of theological exclusivism. The most prominent example is John 14:6, where Christ says: “I am the way, the truth, and the

life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me.” Or Acts 4:12, “Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved.” Or the word spoken by Cyprian of Carthago: “There is no salvation outside the church”, which Calvin took up in his “Institutes”. Like the quoted verses from the New Testament, Cyprian’s statement was not addressed against other religions. It was addressed against the Anti-Bishop in his diocese. But in the history of the church those words time and time again came to be used as a verdict against other religions.

How are we to approach and interpret such statements? I would like to distinguish three lines of argumentation to answer that question: First a linguistic approach, secondly an exegetical method of historical contextualization and thirdly a systematic-theological reflection on how to understand the divinity of Jesus Christ. I will indicate the first two lines of argumentation very briefly, and then turn to the third one.

(a) The linguistic approach:

The American theologian Paul Knitter and others have suggested to compare them to the enthusiastic language of lovers, which also employs superlative and “exclusivistic” figures of speech.¹ Like a child would label his/ her mother as “the best mother in the world”, so the passionate followers of Jesus Christ in the community, in which the gospel of John was composed, expressed their exclusive allegiance to Christ in exclusive confessional statements like the one we find in John 14:6? That verse then is not to be understood as an authentic word *of* Jesus Christ but as a wholehearted confession of faith *in* him.

¹ Paul F. Knitter, *No Other Name? A Critical Survey of Christian Attitudes towards the World Religions* (London: SCM Press 1985), 182-186.

(b) The historical-contextual interpretation of these “exclusivistic” verses:

That interpretation refers to the historical context in which those statements were formulated. For example, in order to understand John 14:6, one has to take into account the situation of oppression of the community in which the gospel of John has been authored. In bitter enmity, accusations were hurled at the Jews of the synagogue: “He who does not honour the Son does not honour the Father who sent him” (John 5:23). “You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father’s desires. He was a murderer from the beginning and has nothing to do with the truth ...; when he lies, he speaks according to his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies” (John 8:44). And John 14:6: “There is no way to God but only by Jesus Christ”.

As a statement against Jews of that time in that situation, those verses would not have a general validity for all times. They need to become historically contextualized.

I find those two lines of argumentation – the linguistic approach, and the historical-contextual approach – fruitful and important. They can and perhaps need to become combined with the systematic-theological reflection on how to understand the divinity of Jesus Christ. I will turn to that reflection now.

(c) The systematic-theological question on how to understand the divinity of Jesus Christ:

It matters a lot where Christology takes its starting point and how this starting point becomes interpreted – not only in terms of a historical reconstruction of the original meaning but in terms of systematic theology which asks how we can understand it today. Should Christian faith and Christian theology understand Jesus Christ primarily as the personification of the universal *Logos* of

God, which “was in the beginning with God” (John 1:1) and which “was the true Light, that gives light to *everyone* was coming into the world.” (John 1:9) or does it focus on Paul’s proclamation of the “word of the cross and the resurrection” as decisive for the justification of the believers.

A Christology which derives from the concept of the eternal and universal *Logos* as spelled out in the introduction of the gospel of John probably, will pave the way for interreligious openness more effectively than a Christology which proceeds from Paul’s emphasis on the centrality of the cross, as the decisive event in history which constitutes salvation. Salvation then can only become achieved where and when the “word of the cross” is proclaimed and believed in the Christian faith. That was basically the position of the Protestant Churches. While on the other hand, the concept of the eternal *Logos* who has been incarnated in Jesus considers God’s coming into the world as the decisive salvific act of God in the incarnation of God’s word. I agree with Ossom-Batsa, who in a brilliant article on that topic stated: “The fact of the incarnation of the ‘Word of God’ can be further developed to show that ‘the Word’ saves all people.”²

The salvation impact of that eternal word is centred in its personification in Jesus but reaches far beyond.

I will take the doctrine of incarnation as the starting point of my reflections and look at Paul from John and not the other way round. Thus, in a way my approach to Christology in the context of a theology of religion may appear to be closer to the Roman Catholic way of thinking than to that of the protestant theology. It is obvious that “Nostra Aetate” referred to the Gospel of John,

² Ossom-Batsa, “Christological Issues. Stumbling Block or Meeting Point for Muslim-Christian Dialogue,” *Ghana Bulletin of Theology*, New Series 1, no. 1 (July 2006): 100.

mainly to the verse I already quoted above: John 1:9, in him, “the true light that gives light to *everyone* was coming into the world”. From there and from the Church fathers’ doctrine of the “*Logos spermatikos*” (the seminal word of God sowed into the soul of every human being) it developed an attitude of acknowledgement towards other religions.

But then, the question appears as how to *understand* incarnation. In the Early Church, that question was answered by the doctrine of the “two natures” of Jesus Christ. It says: The universal word of God as well as the divine self-communication are personified in the humanness of Jesus of Nazareth, so that two ‘natures’ can be attributed to him the divine and the human. The question as to how to relate the two natures to one another was the subject of controversial discussions already in early Christianity. Did the *Logos become* a human being or did he perform an “*assumption of the flesh*”? The lines of those two interpretations can be pursued into Protestant theology.

While the *Lutheran* tradition emphasizes that the *Logos* has *become* a human being, the Reformed tradition tends to claim that in Jesus Christ the *Logos* has performed an *assumption* of the flesh. While the Lutheran tradition stresses the *unity* of the two natures, the Reformed tradition emphasizes the *distinction* between them and their different features. As a consequence, the Lutheran theology focused more clearly on Jesus Christ as the one and only self-mediation of God while reformed theologians like Zwingli were open to think that God could have manifested his spirit even outside the revelation in Christ, for example in Greek philosophy. The answer to the question on how the two natures in Christ are to be related to each other is of high relevance for a theology of religions.

At this point the question appears again: Is the concept of incarnation inextricably linked with a Christological exclusivism?

John Hick once pointed out the problem clearly: “If Jesus was literally God incarnate, and if it is by his death alone that men can be saved, and by their response to him alone that they can appropriate that salvation, then the only doorway to eternal life is the Christian faith. It would follow from this that the large majority of the human race so far have not been saved. But is it credible that the loving God and Father of all men has decreed that only those who have been born within one particular thread of human history shall be saved?”³

In the next part of my paper I will explore an interpretation of the doctrine of the two natures of Jesus Christ, which does not inevitably lead to such a Christocentric soteriological exclusivism.

III. How to Understand the Doctrine of the two Natures of Jesus Christ?

(a) My first suggestion is to understand Christ’s twofold nature not in an essentialist way but *as two relations*. That means it is not to be understood as an ontological, essential, substantial co-existence of two incompatible forms of being: the being of God on the one hand and the being of the human on the other. It makes more sense to understand “*vere Deus*” as the recognition of the intensity which permeated Jesus’s relation with God, the intensity of relationship that binds him with God. “*Vere Deus*” then means: He is so closely related to God that the relation to God constitutes his whole personality, so that men and women who encountered him experienced that as encountering Godself.

A relational interpretation of the “*vere Deus*” allows to stress not only the *unity* but also the *difference* between the divine and the human nature, between the human being and God. Stressing that

³ John Hick, *The Myth of God Incarnate* (Philadelphia, PA.: The Westminster Press 1977), 180.

difference is important for a theology of religions, for it allows to state that the eternal *Logos* of God – which is the divine nature of Christ – is more comprehensive than the human nature. That interpretation comes close to what is called the “Extra-Calvinisticum”, i.e. the teaching that Christ's divine nature cannot be enclosed within a human nature, but remains infinite.

That proposition seems to be in line with the New Testament testimonies of and about Jesus. Jesus distinguished himself clearly from God as it is apparent in a number of New Testament passages. On the one hand he was most conscious of his oneness with God, but on the other hand he rejected any attempts to assign divine titles to him. He rather repeatedly directed attention away from himself and towards the Father, to whom alone all honour and glory are due (John 8:50).

There is a polarity between oneness with God (or the *Logos* of God) and differentness to God (or the *Logos* of God). That distinction corresponds to the distinction between God as the Revealer and the revelation of God, between God-self and God's self-presentation/self-communication. God “who dwells in unapproachable light” (I Tim 6:16) remains an unfathomable mystery even in his revelation. He reveals himself *as* mystery. God's revelation in Christ does not exhaust *God's* being – which is inexhaustible.

Just as a *human* being's “self-revelations”/self-communications cannot exhaust the mystery of his/her person, so too *God's* own self-revelation in Christ does not exhaust his *being*. This enduring difference between the Revealer and the revelation had already been perceived by Thomas Aquinas: “Though the divine nature in the Person of the Son was wholly united with the Son's human

nature, nevertheless this could not encompass, could not incorporate, as it were, the entirety of the power of the Divinity.”⁴

(b) My second suggestion is to take the idea of “representation” as Christology’s central concept for relating the divine and the human nature of Jesus Christ to each other. The idea of representation seems to me to be particularly suited to understand and speak of Jesus Christ in a personal and relational way, both as the representative of God among human beings, and as the representative of authentically being human as well. Jesus Christ “reflects” and presents – represents – God. In this way, for his adherents a salvific relation to God becomes possible in the encounter with Christ, but that does not mean that *extra Christum* (beyond Christ) there can be no *self-presentation*, no *self-representation* of God.

Jesus Christ embodied the presence of God so intensely that he was called the “image of the invisible God” (Col 1:15; cf. II Cor 4:4). Because he was “inhabited” by God, suffused with God’s Spirit, he embodied “God-presence” and conveyed it to those who became his followers. As a person who lived utterly and totally through the relationship with God, he personified authentic human being: wholly open for and receptive to God.

I am using the term “representation” in the sense of “making present”: Jesus made present the Presence of God. Representation thus means more than serving as the “delegate” for another, more than acting and speaking in the name of one who is himself absent. No, precisely in representation we find the expression of that which the concept of revelation is meant to express: that is, not a communication from God who himself is not present, but on the

⁴ *Summa Theologiae* III, 10, 1, ad. 2.

contrary, representation becomes the mode of and vehicle of his presence, of his effective *Being-Here*.

The concept of representation has at least three advantages:

First, in contrast to the long-standing tendency to play up the position of the *divine* nature of Christ while underplaying the position of the *human* nature, the representational model allows a conception of the personhood of Jesus in which we can recognize the equality of both relationships.

Secondly, whereas the classical “dual-nature” Christology has emphatically stressed the idea of “union” of the two natures, the representational model allows us to set out from a union in difference.

Thirdly, the model of participation of being, as formulated in Chalcedon, allows virtually no room for anything other than an exclusive Christology. That is God’s Word, equal in nature to God himself, has in Christ (and only in Christ) become united with human nature.

In contrast, the representational model makes room for the distinction between that which is represented and the “event” of representation. In other words, between the symbolized content and the act of symbolization, we could say it was between the Christ-content and the Christ-event. The Christ-content is universal and extends beyond the Christ-event. If the Christ-content would be tied exclusively to the Christ-event, it forfeits its universal significance. The historical representation in Jesus points to a reality which precedes the particular representation while still being genuinely revealed in and by it.

That approach allows to point up the truth-claim inherent in the Christian Credo while not necessarily entailing the rejection of the religious experiences and truth-claims raised by other

religions. In acknowledging that the being of God is inexhaustible and thus transcends any and all revelations, we can assume that God might also engage symbolic appearances of *other* religions to represent his presence. In acknowledging this, a powerful theological motivation for an open encounter with the followers of other faiths is brought forth. Indeed, it may well turn out that through the symbols and media of other religions God's call will be heard.

What is the 'Christ-content'? What is it, which is 'represented' in Jesus Christ? As I understand the core of the New Testament testimonies, this "what" is God's all-embracing and unconditional, radical grace and attentiveness. Wolfgang Pfüller defines the Christ-content as "limitless, self-offering love in radically trusting confidence in God and in the coming of God's kingdom"⁵; Hans Kessler understands the Christ-content as "true human being – human being entirely in accord with God's being."⁶

This Christ-content becomes real in the Christ-event but is not restricted to it; it rather exists already before the event, drawing it onward, and extends beyond it. The event "represents" the communion between God and the human being, which God has initiated and is hereby making it available.

I do not dare to say that for the Christian faith there are divine revelations equal in value to the revelation in Christ. The biblical testimony is wholly centred on Christ. Phenomena of other religious traditions can be seen as rays of the divine light which according to the Christian faith shines in Christ and can be 'seen' in

⁵Wolfgang Pfüller, *Die Bedeutung Jesu im interreligiösen Horizont: Überlegungen zu einer religiösen Theorie in christlicher Perspektive*. Theologie 41 (Münster: LIT, 2001), 208 (translation: R.B.).

⁶Hans Kessler, "Christologie", in *Handbuch der Dogmatik*, vol. I, eds. Theodor Schneider (Düsseldorf: Patmos 1995²), 392-394 (translation: R.B.).

the light of Christ. But if Christ does indeed embody the *universal* “Word” – the *Logos* of creation and salvation, it then follows that this “Word”, expressing and representing God’s mighty presence, extends *beyond* the Christian tradition.

IV. Truth-claims of Christian Faith

The distinction which I suggest to make between the *content* and the *event* (the historical medium of revelation) has consequences for the understanding of religious truth-claims, for claiming the truth of one’s own religious truth, and for relating it to truth-claims of other religious traditions. What does “truth” in Christian faith mean? The certainty faith gives is not knowledge about facts of salvation that can be formulated as objective statements or dogmas. Rather it means existential trust in God as mediated by Jesus Christ and empowered by the Spirit of God. Understood in that way, the truth of the Christian faith has nothing to do with religious imperialism. It has nothing to do with a sense of superiority which denies the truth of other certainties. It is a certainty, instead, which is existential. And an existential certainty exists in and with the people who live in it. It cannot claim to be an *exclusive* expression of the one universal truth.

This (biblical) understanding of truth has enormous implications for the encounter with adherents of other Christian denominations, of other religions, or with people holding a non-religious view of the world. If the Christians remain conscious that they are not simply *possessing* the truth of God, but *pointing* to it as to a mystery which has revealed – but revealed as a mystery – they will not restrict this truth to the media of their religion. They are entitled to believe in that truth as an authentic and fully salvific self-representation of God. But they have come to understand and formulate it through the specific route of their tradition and their history, and the sources from which they know this tradition and

history. So they cannot claim those media to be the immediate truth of God.

It is precisely this difference between God's truth which is too high for the believers to reach, and their sense of certainty of truth which is reaching out towards God's truth, and can open their minds for other religious perspectives. The certainty of truth to which the believers refer does not have its basis or centre in itself, but points to something beyond, and in this sense makes itself relative. This certainty is an expression of a truth which "passeth all understanding" (Php 4:7). It is higher than any religious consciousness or religious practice.

An understanding of the truth-claims of Christian faith as being personal and existential witnesses to the divine truth, which exceeds religious understanding, enables the Christians to give space alongside them for other certainties of the truth. Personal truths about faith, love and hope can never be absolute. These truths are bound to the persons, or the fellowships, of those who believe, love and hope, and thus even within the same religious tradition can be lived out in more or less different ways. With this consciousness one can come to a fundamental acknowledgement of the different certainties that exist in faith.

Openness to dialogue requires a confidence in the foundations of one's own certainty of the truth, which also acknowledges how religious truth as a personal certainty. Only a person who rests calmly on a firm existential fundament can risk emptying himself/herself in order to encounter other faiths without feeling shaken in his/her identity. But if there is uncertainty in faith, if there is fear of losing one's own identity, then, there can develop a need to secure one's own religious identity through fencing out adherents of other faiths from God's truth and grace. So

strengthening one's own certainty in faith is a prerequisite for openness to adherents of other faiths.

V. Conclusion

I draw three conclusions from my preceding reflections:

(a) The claim to *exclusiveness*, the claim that Christ is the only path to God, holds *within* this faith. It is part of the certainty of Christian faith. As such, it remains related to faith and the confessional expressions of faith. That means that to say "Christ alone (*solus Christus*) is the way to God", "no man cometh unto the Father, but by him" (John 14:6) is to say something about the Christians' confession of Christ. It is not to state a universal abstract truth "about", but a personal testimony "to". It is an existential, not a rational truth. It is not primarily an intellectual / cognitive truth, but a way of life in relation to God. Of course, this way is potentially open to all men and women, but those who do not take it need not necessarily be on the wrong way.

(b) Understanding the doctrine of the human and the divine nature of Jesus Christ in terms of two relations; the relation to humanity and the relation to God and relating these two relations to the concept of representation, however, allows to see Christ as representing God's creative and salvific presence in a most authentic but not exclusive way. That understanding leads to the expectation that also in non-Christian traditions occurrences of God's grace are to be found.

(c) My third and final conclusion, I would like to express in the words of Ossom -Batsa:

The Word of God may be an opening and a meeting point for a dialogue between the two faiths (Christian and Muslim). The Word of God is given to Christians, Muslims, and all people. There is the need for a revised theology of the Word of God, a theology that

Jesus Christ as a stumbling block in interreligious dialogue?
will make the Word of God present to, and have influence on the
lives of all people.⁷

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⁷ Ossom-Batsa, “Christological Issues”, 100.