

## Christ and Extraterrestrial Life

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**Abstract** *This paper explores the relationship between Incarnation and extraterrestrial life in view of the question: can extraterrestrials be saved? The Franciscan theology of Bonaventure and Scotus is used to explore “exoChristology” by examining the Incarnation as a theological rather than anthropological event. The primacy of Christ, held by Franciscan theologians, provides an integral relationship between Christ and creation. From this relationship, it is shown that Incarnation takes place wherever there is intelligible life. It is suggested that all possible worlds, created through the Word of God, bear a spiritual potency within them and are open to spiritual transformation. The divine Word is incarnate in every created order through the appropriate form of intelligible life within that order and completes that order through love. Because Incarnation may take on other extraterrestrial life forms, it is suggested that there may be multiple incarnations but only one Christ.*

**Key words:** ExoChristology; Incarnation; Bonaventure; Scotus; Rahner; Trinity; Creation; Extraterrestrial

### Introduction

Speculation on the meaning of Christ for extraterrestrial (ET) life has received little attention in the science and religion dialogue, despite advances in astronomy, astrobiology and space exploration. Perhaps the hesitation in undertaking this pursuit is the fear of disrupting the core doctrine of Christian faith, namely, the work of Jesus Christ. Paul Davies writes in his book, *God and the New Physics*: “The existence of extra-terrestrial intelligences would have a profound impact on religion, shattering completely the traditional perspective on God’s relationship with man... The prospect of a host of ‘alien Christs’... has a rather absurd aspect.”<sup>1</sup> Indeed, such an idea would be absurd if we were to imagine the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, for example, as a Martian. Perhaps the hesitation in discussing Christ and ET life relates to the western claim that the incarnation is dependent on fallen humanity. Such a claim limits the mystery of Christ to the conditions of terrestrial life. It will be argued here that speculation on Christ and ET life does not diminish the work of Jesus Christ, but instead allows us to reclaim the cosmological meaning of Christ that was integral to patristic thought, especially among the Greek fathers. The

cosmological significance of Christ reflects the primary reason for the incarnation as the eternal love of God and not sin, as the western theological tradition has maintained.

Drawing upon the primacy of the Christ tradition in the writings of Duns Scotus (1265–1308) and Bonaventure (1217–1274), I will argue that consideration of Christ and ET life allows one to refocus the incarnation as a theological question and not an anthropological one. Bonaventure's theology, in particular, enables us to understand the meaning of Christ as the center between Trinity and creation. By exploring the significance of the divine Trinitarian Word of God as the ontological basis for all created orders, I will describe how every created order that has the capacity for intelligent life is Christologically structured. I will conclude by discussing the significance of Christ as symbol, in light of ET salvation and multiple incarnations.

### An historical view

While advances in astronomy and space technology, as well as movies like *Contact*, render the modern person attuned to the possibility of ET life, speculation on ET life is not entirely new. The ancient Greeks wondered if there were many worlds, or only one. Among atomistic philosophers, Epicurus (341–270 BC) and later Lucretius (98–54 BC), suggested that because there are an infinite number of atoms, there could be an infinite number of worlds. They even asserted the existence of plants and creatures in other worlds.<sup>2</sup> The champion of Greek philosophy, Aristotle, rejected the argument of the atomists on the belief that all things naturally seek their proper place. He posited a cosmological vision of a single reality with the earth at its center and concluded that, since there is only one center, there is only one world. Although Aristotle's argument prevailed over the atomists, the doyen of scholastic theology, Thomas Aquinas, did not quite adhere to the geocentric argument. Instead, he argued that perfection is found in unity; hence, an omnipotent God would best express himself in a single perfect world.<sup>3</sup> Subsequent thinkers, however, did not limit God's perfection to a single world. John Buridian (1295–1358), Nicole Oresme (1320–1382) and Nicholas Cusa (1401–1464) all held to a many-worlds idea and some, like Cusa, even maintained belief in ET life. Ted Peters writes: "During the formidable period of medieval scholasticism, despite the forceful impact of Aristotelian philosophy, Christian theology was by no means wedded to the idea that God created only one world... Not only did some of our best minds affirm the idea of multiple worlds, some even spoke positively regarding the existence of extraterrestrial life."<sup>4</sup>

In our own time, the late Carl Sagan described an attitude of "earth chauvinism" that makes the earth the standard for everywhere.<sup>5</sup> Andrew Burgess identified this chauvinism as a "cosmic hubris," believing that the Creator of the universe was incarnate on our own bit of interstellar debris and maintains a special relationship to the human species.<sup>6</sup> As Burgess and others have pointed out, the Christian story is based on a pre-Copernican cosmology. He writes:

As long as someone is thinking in terms of a geocentric universe and an earth-deity, the story has a certain plausibility... As soon as astronomy changes theories, however, the whole Christian story loses the only setting within which it would make sense. With the solar system no longer the center of anything, imagining that what happens here forms the center of a universal drama becomes simply silly.<sup>7</sup>

What Burgess identified is a relationship known for centuries among patristic and medieval writers: namely, theology is integrally related to cosmology. Once cosmology changes, so too does theology, whether implicitly or explicitly.

There is no doubt that advances in modern astronomy are changing our view of life in the universe. According to leading scientists, there is mounting evidence that Earth might not be the only oasis in the cosmos, nor even in our solar system. Researchers have long known that tiny fragments of one planet, such as meteors, can crash onto another planet's surface. This gives life the potential to jump from place to place in our solar system. Recent research suggests that the ingredients necessary for life as we know it to evolve from scratch are present in many places besides Earth. The ingredients include liquid solvents, such as water; a variety of elements, such as carbon, nitrogen and phosphorus for constructing organic molecules; and compounds that store energy. According to Bruce M. Jakosky, director of the Center for Astrobiology at the University of Colorado in Boulder, the planet Mars and Jupiter's moon Europa offer tantalizing combinations of these ingredients right in our celestial neighborhood.<sup>8</sup> Lewis Ford writes: "even if only one planet out of every 150,000 contained life, there would be one million life-worlds in our galaxy, some of which we can reasonably assume contain intelligent life, for whom, we presume, God would also be concerned."<sup>9</sup>

Almost fifty years ago, J. Edgar Burns viewed the widening horizon of the universe through space exploration as the emergence of a new "space-faith," or what he called "cosmolatry." He posited, somewhat prophetically, that "what seems to have received scant attention is the appearance of a phenomenon which has all the earmarks of a new religion."<sup>10</sup> By "new religion" it is not entirely clear whether Burns meant an annihilation of the past or a breakthrough in religious consciousness that renders our "truth claims" obsolete. What the term does connote, however, echoes an insight of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, namely, that Christianity is reaching the end of one of the natural cycles of its existence. "Christ must be born again," he said, "he must be reincarnated in a world that has become too different from that in which he lived."<sup>11</sup> It is in light of this insight that "exoChristology," a term Burgess used to discuss Christological issues "raised by discoveries in outer space,"<sup>12</sup> takes on new import for Christian faith. For if Jesus Christ is absolute Savior, what does this mean for intelligent beings inhabiting a far corner of the cosmos? Or, as Ted Peters asks, if ET life is discovered, would missionaries be called for?<sup>13</sup>

### **Incarnation: Sin or love?**

The question of exoChristology is at first disarming because it seems to debunk the work of Jesus Christ as Savior. Western Christology, following Anselm of

Canterbury, maintains that human sin is the principal reason for the incarnation. The sin of Adam is repaired by Christ, since what is not healed cannot be redeemed. Anselm defined sin as an affront to God's honor so that divine justice demands recompense either by satisfaction or by punishment. The infinite magnitude of the offense of sin requires a like satisfaction, which can be achieved only by one who is both divine (and therefore can make such satisfaction) and human (who is bound to make it). Following the satisfaction theory, western Christology has focused on the sinfulness of the human person, the guilt incurred by sin, and the saving work of Christ.<sup>14</sup> However, there is another approach to the incarnation which, as Karl Rahner noted, has never been objected to by the Church's *magisterium*, although it has never been embraced by it either.<sup>15</sup> This is the doctrine of the primacy of Christ, by which Christ is first in God's intention to love and hence to create. In this school of thought, love is the principal reason for the Incarnation, not sin. The view of Christ within a cosmological context finds its roots in the New Testament. In the letter to the Colossians (1:16–17), for example, the author writes: "All things were created through him and for him. Before anything was created, he existed . . . and he holds all things in unity." The Pauline letters describe Christ as the center of unity drawing all things back to their origin. Since the world was created for Christ (Col 1:16), it must be recapitulated or reestablished in and through him under whose power all are to be united. This cosmic Christological thought was explored by the Greek Fathers, such as Origen and Maximus the Confessor, who held that Christ is the redeeming and fulfilling center of the total created universe. Christ belongs to the very structure of the universe.<sup>16</sup>

Whether sin is a terrestrial condition or not, the primacy of Christ enables us to explore exoChristology and its import for ET life based on the Incarnation as a *theological* question and not an anthropological (and hence terrestrial) one. By examining the Incarnation as a *theological* question, the scope of salvation is widened to include cosmic order wherever that order is found. One of the hallmarks of Franciscan theology is the integral link between the creation and incarnation that form two sides of the mystery of God's self-communicative love. Franciscan theology allows us to speculate on ET salvation by first examining the relationship between Incarnation and ET creation, and second, by exploring ET salvation as completion or wholeness, whether or not sin is part of ET creation. By drawing upon medieval thinkers such as Bonaventure and Duns Scotus, we can begin to explore a theological basis for exoChristology and bring our findings into dialogue with contemporary theologians.

### Scotus and the primacy of Christ

Scotus's doctrine on the primacy of Christ centers on divine freedom and self-revelation. He considered not what God would have done had the fall not occurred (that is, "would Christ have come if Adam did not sin?"), but rather what was God's original intent relative to the incarnation; that is, what kind of God would become incarnate? The possibility for incarnation, according to Scotus,

is grounded in the nature of God as ultimate goodness or love. God's love is ordered, free and holy and in which God loves God's own self for ever, even in others; and this love is unselfish, since God is the cause of all creatures. Thus, he claimed, "the predestination of anyone to glory is prior by nature to the prevision of the sin or damnation of anyone."<sup>17</sup> According to Scotus, the divine initiative of love has as its primary object that creature capable of receiving the fullest measure of God's goodness and glory and who, in turn, could respond in the fullest measure. He wrote: "First, God wills good for himself as the end of all things; second, he wills that another be good for him. This is the moment of predestination."<sup>18</sup> Thus, God is perfect love and wills according to the perfection of that love. Christ would have come in the highest glory in creation, that is, the perfect praise and love of God, even if there was no sin and thus no need for redemption. Since Christ is first in God's intention to love and thus to create, he is the center and summit of all God's creative and redemptive works; all of creation is ordered to him. God, therefore, intended the highest glory as the ultimate and final end, and thus the incarnation as leading to that end.<sup>19</sup>

For Scotus, the incarnation represents not a divine response to a human need for salvation, but instead the divine intention from all eternity to raise human nature to the highest point of glory by uniting it with divine nature.<sup>20</sup> Scotus did not neglect sin and the need for redemption; however, he did not view sin as the reason for the incarnation. Rather, the mutuality between God and human persons realized in the incarnation is grounded in the very nature of God as love. As Allan Wolter notes: "the primacy of Christ makes the human nature of Christ the *motif* the Divine Architect was to carry out in the rest of creation . . . after his body the visible world was sculptured. The whole universe is full of Christ."<sup>21</sup> Christ, therefore, is the meaning and model of creation and every creature is made in the image of Christ.

While Scotus's doctrine of the primacy of Christ is explicit, his predecessor, Bonaventure, developed a more nuanced approach to the meaning of the incarnation. Like Scotus, he did not consider the incarnation to be a sort of afterthought on the part of God; the Incarnation did not take place simply because of sin. Rather, as the most noble of God's works, the Incarnation is willed for its own sake and not for the sake of any lesser good. If one looks at the various reasons Bonaventure offers for the incarnation, sin is the last reason for such a magnificent event. The first reason for the incarnation, he states, is that God's infinite power, wisdom and goodness are manifested in a perfect manner. The power of God is the Father, the wisdom of God is the Son, and the goodness of God is the Spirit. Thus, in the incarnation, the triune God is expressed in history. The second reason, he states, is for perfection of the universe. Since the first (principle) should be joined with the last (humanity), it is fitting that the divine Word be united to human nature. Since the entire created order is related to humanity, it finds its fulfillment in perfect glorification of humanity. By bringing the world to completion through God's personal self-communication in the Incarnation, God has also brought about the perfect object for human contemplation in glory. The second reason for the incarnation, therefore, is perfection of the created order. The *last* reason for the incarnation, Bonaventure states, is that in order to overcome

the infirmity of human sin, it was necessary to have a God-man as mediator. Thus, while sin is a reason for the incarnation it is not the primary reason.<sup>22</sup> Rather, as Zachary Hayes indicates, Bonaventure sees the Incarnation as the highest work of creation while carefully avoiding any necessity on the part of God.

Bonaventure viewed the incarnation as the achievement and summit of creation. In Jesus Christ, the Word incarnate, the potency that lies in humanity to receive the very personal self-communication of God is realized. The incarnation, therefore, is the perfect realization of what is potentially embedded in human nature, that is, union with the divine. In this way, Christ and the world are not accidentally related but intrinsically connected. The incarnation, according to Bonaventure, *completes* creation.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, salvation may be considered not only as the work of restoration but completion. To be “saved” is to be made whole and complete in one’s capacity for God. If the order of creation reaches its highpoint in humanity, which has the potential for union with God, that potential is fully realized in the Word incarnate.<sup>24</sup>

While Bonaventure viewed the incarnation as the noble work of God, however, he also realized that it is shaped by its redemptive function. Bonaventure clearly viewed sin as embedded in historical reality, although he did not limit the mystery of Christ to sin. “Christ cannot be willed by God *occasionaliter*, that is, simply because of sin.”<sup>25</sup> The incarnation is not a sort of after-thought on the part of God. Rather, from eternity, God included the possibility of a fall of the human race and therefore structured the human person with a view to redemption. In Bonaventure’s view, Christ’s redemptive work relates to the overcoming of sin, but it does so in a way that brings God’s creative action in the world to completion. As the consummation of the created order, the incarnation is willed for its own sake and not for a lesser good such as sin.<sup>26</sup> God completes what God initiates in creation and crowns it with eternal significance.<sup>27</sup> It is not sin that is the cause of the incarnation, but simply the excess love and mercy of God.<sup>28</sup>

Although sin is not the primary reason for the incarnation, its existence in humanity (and creation) does provide a reason for the incarnation, insofar as the healing of sin corresponds to the completion of creation. Hayes describes Bonaventure’s soteriology as one of redemptive completion, in which the incarnation both heals humanity of its woundedness through its redemptive function and brings creation to completion.<sup>29</sup> He writes:

While the incarnation bears its own *ratio*, the soteriological dimension appears as the *ratio inducens*, a term which points to the actuality of a fallen history, and holds open the possibility that an incarnation willed for its own sake as the highest revelation of the love of God can, in fact, enter into history as a redemptive act. Thus while the incarnation is a redemptive mystery, it fulfills the functions in the world as well, particularly the perfection of the universe.<sup>30</sup>

While the primary reason for the incarnation is cosmic completion, according to Bonaventure, redemption is integral to the process of completion. Since everything is created through the Word, creation itself is completed through the Word incarnate. The basis for Bonaventure’s redemptive completion theory lies in the integral relationship between the Trinity and creation. To explore incarnation and

creation as a single mystery of God's self-communicative love, therefore, it is helpful to examine his doctrine of the Trinity.

### Trinity and creation

Bonaventure drew an integral relationship between incarnation and creation in such a way that one cannot be understood without the other. The key to his theology of creation lies in the Trinity and the eternal generation of the divine Word from the Father. The Father, who is without origin (innascible) and fecund, is totally self-communicative and communicates the entirety of his ideas in one other than himself. It is a necessary self-communication that arises by reason of his very nature as goodness. The totality of who God is, for Bonaventure, is grounded in the nature of the Father as unbegotten self-communicative goodness. The Father, therefore, is principle of the Trinity and hence principle of creation. The self-communicative goodness of the Father is literally God giving Godself away—but in such a way that fecundity marks the Trinity's dynamic, eternal life. The necessity of God to give Godself away is realized in the Son. It is not a necessity imposed from the outside, but an inner necessity of the divine being to be always and completely self-sufficient and totally in conformity with itself.<sup>31</sup> This total expression of the Father's love is the Word, who proceeds from the Father as Word by way of exemplarity. God in his own self-knowledge is exemplar of all else. Since God exists only as Trinity, exemplarity refers to the entire Trinity; however, the mystery of the Trinity is reflected in the mystery of the second person. Although the doctrine of exemplarity refers to the relations between God and creation, the basis of this doctrine is the relationship between the Father and the Son. As the full and total expression of God's primal fruitfulness, the Son is also the expression of all that God can be in relation to the finite.<sup>32</sup> Thus, the relation between the Father and Son is the first and primal relation and the basis for all other relations.

It is precisely in the relationship between the Father and Son that one must describe creation for Bonaventure, for just as "the [divine] Word is the inner self-expression of God, the created order is the external expression of the inner Word." As the Father's self-expression, the Word is the openness of the Father to the other in all its forms. The second person is God precisely as expressive being.<sup>33</sup> God's being as self-communicative love gives expression to its entire fruitfulness in the generation of the Son, so that in generating the Son, the Father speaks one Word immanent to himself in which is expressed the possibility of creation.<sup>34</sup> However, the relationship between the Father and Son is united in the perfect love of the Spirit, so that if the divine Word is the basis of creation, the Spirit is the life of creation breathed forth as the bond of love between the Father and Son. As the center of divine Life, the Word is the ontological basis for all that is other than the Father which, as an expressed Word, is vivified through the life of the Spirit. The possibility of God's creative activity, therefore, rests in his being as triune, which is to say that God could not communicate being to the finite if he were not supremely communicative in himself.<sup>35</sup> The Word who is the center of the divine

life is also the exemplar of creation; and creation itself may be seen as an external word in which the one divine Word of the Father is objectified through the life of the Spirit. Insofar as the one Word is the expression of the entire inner-Trinitarian structure of God, that which is created is an expression of the Word which bears within itself the imprint of the Trinity.<sup>36</sup> God's being as self-communicative love gives expression to its entire fruitfulness in the generation of the Son, so that in generating the Son, the Father speaks one Word immanent to Himself in which is expressed the possibility of creation, indeed, all possible created orders.<sup>37</sup> Hayes writes, "if it is true that the triune God creates after his own Image, that is, after the Word, then it follows that any created reality will possess, in its inner constitution, a relation to this uncreated Word."<sup>38</sup>

According to Bonaventure, creation is co-spoken in the eternal Word insofar as every free act of creation is an eternal generation of the Word of the Father's love breathed forth by the Spirit. When God creates, he can do so only in and through the Word of his own otherness, so that whatever created reality exists appears as the external otherness that is placed through the immanent otherness. Creation therefore possesses, in its inner constitution, a relation to the uncreated (divine) Word.<sup>39</sup> For Bonaventure, the inner-Trinitarian speaking of the eternal Word is the ontological basis for the possibility of creation. "Because there is a Word in God, creation can exist as an external Word; because there is an absolute otherness, there can be a relative otherness."<sup>40</sup> It is in the eternal generation of the divine Word that we find the exemplary *ratio* of all emanations, because it is in the emanation of the Word that God disposes all things.<sup>41</sup> The generation of the Word by the Father through the love of the Spirit is the necessary prior condition for whatever comes from God in the order of creation. Creation is co-spoken in the Word that is the Father's self-utterance and co-loved in the Spirit of love breathed mutually by the Father and Son.<sup>42</sup>

Because the created world is co-spoken with the eternal Word, it does not exist as a self-contained Order, but bears within it a drive towards the spiritual. Thus, whatever constitutes the created order—for example, material reality—would find its consummation in spiritual reality. The centrality of the Word with regard to God and creation signifies that creation possesses, in its inner constitution, a relation to the uncreated (divine) Word. In this respect we can say that creation is more than divine will; rather, it expresses the self-communicative love of God, and is an outward expression of that love insofar as it is an external embodiment of the divine Word. God, who is the purest of love within, creates not out of any need but out of desire to manifest something of the mystery of the divine truth, goodness and beauty outwardly and to bring forth creatures capable of participating in the splendor of the divine life.<sup>43</sup> Only a dynamic, self-communicative God can be a creator God, and the weight of that self-communicating falls upon the Word as the necessary condition for any created being. As Hayes indicates, "God speaks but one Word in which the world and its history are co-spoken."<sup>44</sup> Therefore, the created order reflects at some level the relation of the Son to the Father bound together in the love of the Spirit, for this relation is the ontological condition both of creation and of incarnation.<sup>45</sup>

## The Christophic principle

Bonaventure's integral relationship between creation and incarnation signifies that the incarnation is not an isolated event, but is integral to the possibility of creation itself: one is inconceivable without the other. Because of this integral relationship between creation and incarnation, "a world without Christ is an incomplete world," that is, the created order is structured Christologically.<sup>46</sup> Since any created order or all possible worlds are centered in the one Word of God, it could be said that all created orders are structured Christologically. We might term this idea the "Christophic Principle," since the universe is not simply fit, or even better, fine-tuned, for human life (anthropic principle) but is patterned on the divine Word of God and thus oriented toward Christ or the perfect union between God and created reality.<sup>47</sup> The Christophic principle means that Christ is the reason for every created order; however, that created order is conceived, because Christ is first in God's intention to love and thus to create. Because the universe is structured Christologically, every created order will bear a potency for union with the divine. Bonaventure reflected on the perfection of creation in light of the incarnation and said that (in this creation) matter tends toward spirit. The union of matter and spirit in union with the divine is the perfection of creation. Jesus is the fullest realization of the most noble potency of creation who, in his unique person, brings the created order to its completion. Bonaventure writes: "The perfection of the entire order is realized for in that one being the unity of all reality is brought to consummation."<sup>48</sup> On an ET level, we can speculate that the same divine Word is the pattern of all that exists, imparting to that creation a spiritual potency for union with the divine. Just as Jesus is the fullest realization of divinized humanity in terrestrial creation, so too, we can assume that the fullest union of natures on an ET level will occur (or occurs) in a personal union as well.

Hayes indicates that the congruent relationship between incarnation and (earthly) creation is the fundamental relationship for Bonaventure that renders the cosmos more than material reality—the material world is spiritually potent because it is Christologically structured. According to Hayes, "the creative and sustaining principle of all created reality is not a mystery of arbitrariness, nor a mystery of domination and control...it is a mystery of orderly love."<sup>49</sup> The meaning of creation centered in Christ is the mystery of the Word incarnate, grounded in the mystery of divine, self-communicative love. In the context of medieval theology, this is a rejection of the idea that God first created a world that had no relation to the figure of Christ, and that only after the fall of humanity did a "second decree" of God direct itself to the figure of a savior in the form of Christ.<sup>50</sup> For Bonaventure, as for Scotus, a world without Christ is an incomplete world. The whole creation is made for Christ. In short, the primary reason for the incarnation is related not to the "forgiveness of sin" but to the completion of creation in its relationship to God. The incarnation is salvific because all of creation has a spiritual capacity for God that stands open to completion in the human person and ultimately in Jesus Christ.<sup>51</sup>

### Extraterrestrial salvation?

The Franciscan view of incarnation as a mystery of orderly love uncouples the primary reason for the incarnation from the error of sin or “saving from the risk or harm of death due to sin.”<sup>52</sup> The meaning of the incarnation is grounded in God’s eternal desire to love. Salvation therefore is not the repair of a defect in creation, but the completion of creation in its God-centeredness. Although Bonaventure identified the incarnation as redemptive, the redemptive function of the incarnation is integral to its function of completion. The completion of creation by the incarnation is not contingent on the fallen condition of humanity, but on the mystery of God as love. An understanding of the incarnation as an act of love rather than a condition of sin may be more fitting to an evolutionary universe where human original sin is under revision.<sup>53</sup>

The independence of incarnation from original sin allows us to consider the mystery of Christ in other possible world orders. As Bonaventure and Scotus indicate, God could not communicate being to the finite if he were not supremely communicative in himself. In the one divine Word is expressed the entirety of who God is, and thus the possibilities of all that God can create. Although Bonaventure and Scotus defined God’s creative activity in view of *this* world order (since it exists), the theological significance of God’s creative action through the Word means that any created reality, wherever it exists, would possess an inner constitution in relation to the divine Word of God. Creation (however conceived) and incarnation belong together. Since Christ is first in God’s intention to love, the existence of any world order as an expression of that love will be Christologically structured. Hence, because the incarnation completes that which God creates, extraterrestrials, if they exist, will be open to an incarnation and, in the broadest sense, “saved,” insofar as an incarnation of the divine Word will complete ET creation in whatever way that creation can fully accept the Word into it. While the term “incarnation” might not be appropriate to another world order, since it means literally taking on flesh, what we are really talking about is embodiment of the divine Word in created reality. Incarnation as the full self-communication of God’s Word in created reality takes place where there is the ability to grasp the divine Word in created reality as the Word of God’s love. To say that Jesus Christ reveals God is to say that, in Jesus, God can be known and loved. Incarnation on an ET level could conceivably take place, as long as there is some type of intelligence within the ET species to grasp the Word of God through knowledge of the divine embodied Word. Since incarnation is integral to creation, intelligibility of the divine Word cannot be divorced from the material expression of that Word. Knowledge of God must ultimately yield to love of God, since God is love. Thus, knowledge of God that leads to a deepening of love must lead to expression of that love in some form of embodied life.<sup>54</sup> On the terrestrial level, Jesus Christ assumes a bodily nature by which all of creation (that is, material reality) is assumed into relationship with God. Similarly, on an ET level, incarnation must assume a form that includes the material reality of that creation, in whatever way that creation is constituted.

## Contemporary dialogue

The integral relationship between incarnation—creation in view of exoChristology connotes the idea of “many incarnations but one Christ.” This idea finds support in the thought of Karl Rahner who wrote: “In view of the immutability of God in himself and the identity of the Logos with God, it cannot be proved that a multiple incarnation in different histories of salvation is absolutely unthinkable.”<sup>55</sup> The depth of Rahner’s insight is given breadth and width by Paul Tillich, who argued that the understanding of Christ for the meaning of the universe relates to the understanding of the meaning of the symbol “Christ.” By speaking of Christ as a symbol, Tillich challenges us to consider the cosmological significance of Christ:

A question arises which has been carefully avoided by many traditional theologians, even though it is consciously or unconsciously alive for most contemporary people. It is the problem of how to understand the meaning of the symbol ‘Christ’ in the light of the immensity of the universe, the heliocentric system of planets, the infinitely small part of the universe which man and his history constitute, and the possibility of other worlds in which divine self-manifestations may appear and be received... [O]ur basic answer leaves the universe open for possible divine manifestations in other areas or periods of being. Such possibilities cannot be denied. But they cannot be proved or disproved. Incarnation is unique for the special group in which it happens, but it is not unique in the sense that other singular incarnations for other unique worlds are excluded... Man cannot claim to occupy the only possible place for incarnation.<sup>56</sup>

What Rahner and Tillich suggest is that the doctrine of the incarnation, neatly formulated as the complete union of the two natures of Jesus Christ, has ultimately led to the disappearance of Christ; that is, the meaning of Christ has dropped out of the formula. Rahner summed up the problem when he wrote that there is a “mysterious monophysite undercurrent in ordinary Christology and a tendency to let the creaturely be overwhelmed in the face of the Absolute, as though God were to become greater and more real by devaluation and cancellation of the creature.”<sup>57</sup> Although, he indicated, the name Jesus Christ is the undivided experience that constitutes the central Christian dogma, there is a tendency to split the reality of God and the human man Jesus—so that, on a practical level, we fail to see that Christ is not simply the individual existent Jesus of Nazareth but the permanent openness of our humanity to God and hence God’s life in us. Tillich’s search to “understand the meaning of the symbol ‘Christ’ in the light of the immensity of the universe” does not diminish the reality of Jesus Christ, but restores the meaning of Christ to the person of Jesus, who brings terrestrial creation to its fulfillment in God. Jesus Christ is real and Christ symbolizes the real union of God-creation for terrestrial life; however, as Raimon Panikkar notes, the meaning of Christ is beyond the man, Jesus of Nazareth. Panikkar states that “Christ is the symbol of the whole of reality,” so that not only are “all the treasures of divinity included in Christ, but that ‘all the mysteries of man’ as well as the thickness of the universe are also hidden in him.”<sup>58</sup> He uses the word “symbol” to “express an experience of reality in which subject and object, the interpretation and the interpreted, the phenomenon and its noumenon, are

inextricably linked."<sup>59</sup> Christ is symbol of the Trinitarian mystery of God by which God is able to communicate God's life completely to another and to be in union with the other as beloved in a perichoresis of love.<sup>60</sup> Jesus is the Christ, he indicates, but Christ is more than the historical Jesus. He states that Christ's reality is not exhausted with Jesus' historicity<sup>61</sup>—"Christ is that central symbol that incorporates the whole of reality."<sup>62</sup> John McKenzie, in a discussion of the Pauline phrase "in Christ," states that "Christ is a principle of grace and virtue and these things are fulfilled in Christ: the love of God, the grace of God, spiritual enrichment, the righteousness of God, freedom, strength, faith and love."<sup>63</sup> McKenzie highlights the idea that Christ is a life, not a law or doctrine, by which grace and virtue is possible. Christ is the life not only of human life or life in terrestrial creation, but the life of the universe and all universes where there is intelligent life. Christ symbolizes the perfect union of God and creation, which is expressed in a creaturely personal union; thus the symbol of Christ not only mediates what is symbolized—the life of God—but also symbolizes the life of the creature in God.

In view of the meaning of Christ, we can say that Christ is the symbol of what is intended for created reality, that is, the divinization of creation which, on the level of human experience, reaches its culmination in the person, Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus is not the great exception to terrestrial life, but its fulfillment. Karl Rahner claimed that, in Jesus, we experience the fact that the mystery of the human person, which is not for us to control, and "which is bound up with the absurdity of guilt and death is, nevertheless, hidden in the love of God."<sup>64</sup> Jesus the man is truly God and the true divinization of our humanity; in him we attain full humanization.<sup>65</sup> However, Christ is more than Jesus. Christ, the Word incarnate, is the One in whom all created reality is transformed in the personal love of God. To speak of Christ on the level of ET life, therefore, is not to restrict the discussion to Jesus alone, but to see Christ as the icon of created reality. Christ is the divinization of created reality in whatever way the divine Word can fully enter into that reality. In short, Christ completes every possible world order by entering into that order through an incarnation or Word-embodiment—and completes that order through a self-giving act of love.<sup>66</sup> The Word character of all possible worlds renders each of them a spiritual potency for union with the divine. The embodiment of the Word in created reality, wherever a created order is able to express the embodied Word in an intelligible manner, is the realization of the spiritual potency of that created order. The Word enters into it in its physical form and, as the Christ, transforms it from within in its relation to God. Thus, while ET life may include multiple incarnations, there remains only one Spirit and one Christ to the glory of God the Father.

## Conclusion

The question that continues to haunt scientists and thinkers alike is: are we alone in the universe? The Italian physicist, Enrico Fermi, claimed that if the conditions for ET life are such that such life should be flourishing, where is everybody?<sup>67</sup> The

seeming contradiction between the high probability of ET life and the lack of evidence has led to a diversity of views among scientists; among theologians, the question of ET life has virtually been ignored. Perhaps the problem of confronting ET life is that we are looking for a mirror image.<sup>68</sup> In view of a search for a mirror image, theological speculation on ET life becomes problematic. We wind up speculating on the absurdity of “alien Christs” because we have no norm for understanding Christ other than the human condition and, even more so, a sinful condition.

In this study, I have shifted the lens from the human person to the mystery of God who is a Trinity of infinite, self-communicative love. By exploring the significance of Christ as the divine Word of God, intended from all eternity to be the Word incarnate and thus the glory of God, it is possible to expand the meaning of Christ from its terrestrial limits to the divine aim of every created order. Relying on Scotus’s and Bonaventure’s theology of the incarnation, we see that the incarnation has little to do with human sin and instead reflects the fecund, self-communicative love of God. God perfects what God creates by entering into creation and establishing for it a pattern of divinization that renders creation complete in its relationship to God. On the level of human creation, Jesus Christ “saves” insofar as Christ completes this creation through his redemptive death and resurrection. On an ET level, however, Christ may assume another form integral to that creation, by which that creation may be spiritually complete in its relationship with God. By viewing the incarnation as the primacy of Christ, I suggest that every created life-bearing order is Christologically structured so that, following Rahner’s lead, there may be multiple incarnations but only one Christ. The reality of Christ, therefore, is the union of God and creation and, as symbol, mediates the divinization of every created order in its relation to God. The cosmological significance of Christ means that Christ is the *alpha* and *omega*, the beginning of every created order as Word of God and the completion of that order as incarnation of the Word. Thus, I conclude that extraterrestrials, however created, will be “saved” insofar as they bear a Word character and are disposed to an incarnation by which the Word can be embodied in that creation and transform it from within. The meaning of Christ is rooted in divine love, which freely communicates itself in a diversity of expressions. Sin may be the human word for terrestrial incompleteness.

## Endnotes

- 1 Paul Davies, *God and the New Physics* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1983), 71.
- 2 Ted Peters, *Science, Theology, and Ethics* (Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate, 2003), 122.
- 3 *Ibid.*, 123.
- 4 *Ibid.*, 125.
- 5 Andrew J. Burgess, “Earth Chauvinism,” *Christian Century*, 93 (1976): 1098.
- 6 *Ibid.*
- 7 *Ibid.*, 1100.
- 8 Christen Brownlee, “Is Anybody Out There?,” *Science News*, 169, no. 3 (2006): 42. Available online at <http://www.sciencenews.org/articles/20060121/bob10.asp>

- 9 Lewis S. Ford, *The Lure of God: A Biblical Background for Process Theism* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), 56.
- 10 J. Edgar Burns, "Cosmolatry," *The Catholic World*, 191 (1960): 284.
- 11 Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *Christianity and Evolution*, trans. René Hague (New York: HarcourtBrace Jovanovich, 1971), 94–95.
- 12 Burgess, "Earth Chauvinism," 1098.
- 13 Peters, *Science, Theology, and Ethics*, 128.
- 14 Ilia Delio, "Revisiting the Franciscan Doctrine of Christ," *Theological Studies* 63 (2003): 3–4; Bernard McGinn, "Christ as Savior in the West," in *Christian Spirituality: Origins to the Twelfth Century*, ed. Bernard McGinn and John Meyendorff, vol. 16 of *World Spirituality: An Encyclopedic History of the Religious Quest*, ed. Ewert H. Cousins (New York: Crossroad, 1987), 256.
- 15 Karl Rahner, "Christology Within an Evolutionary View of the World," in *Theological Investigations*, vol. V, trans. Karl-H. Kruger (Baltimore: Helicon Press, 1966), 184. For a good historical view of the primacy of Christ, see Michael D. Meilach, *The Primacy of Christ: Life and Doctrine* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1964).
- 16 For a discussion of the cosmic Christology of the Greek Fathers, see George A. Maloney, *The Cosmic Christ: From Paul to Teilhard* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1968), 142–181.
- 17 Allan B. Wolter, *Duns Scotus: Four Questions on Mary* (Santa Barbara, Calif.: Old Mission Santa Barbara, 1988), 29.
- 18 This quotation is found in the *Opus Oxoniensis* Ms. 137, fol. 174b in the Biblioteca de Assisi: "Volendo alios condiligere idem obiect secum . . . Quare primo se amat ordinate et per consequens non inordinate, zelando vel invidendo, secundo vult alios habere condiligentes" cited in Giovanni Iammarrone, "The Timeliness and Limitations of the Christology of John Duns Scotus for the Development of a Contemporary Theology of Christ," trans. Ignatius McCormack, *Greyfriars Review* 7, no. 2 (1993): 233, no. 13.
- 19 Wolter writes: "Predestination consists in foreordaining someone first of all to glory and then to other things which are ordered to glory. Now the human nature in Christ was predestined to be glorified, and in order to be glorified, it was predestined to be united to the Word, in as much as such glory as it was granted would never have been conferred on this nature had it not been so united . . . And just as it is foreordained that this nature be united to the Word, so it is predestined that the Word be man and that this man be the Word" (Wolter, *Four Questions on Mary*, 29).
- 20 Mary Beth Ingham, "John Duns Scotus: An Integrated Vision," in *The History of Franciscan Theology*, ed. Kenan B. Osborne (New York: Franciscan Institute, 1994), 219–226.
- 21 Allan Wolter, "John Duns Scotus on the Primacy and Personality of Christ," in *Franciscan Christology*, ed. Damian McElrath (New York: Franciscan Institute, 1980), 141.
- 22 For a summary of the reasons for the Incarnation, see Francis Xavier Pancheri, *The Universal Primacy of Christ*, trans. Juniper B. Carol (Front Royal, Va.: Christendom Publications, 1984), 19–20; Zachary Hayes, *The Hidden Center: Spirituality and Speculative Christology in St. Bonaventure* (New York: Franciscan Institute, 1992), 172–173.
- 23 Zachary Hayes has written extensively on this idea. See Zachary Hayes, "Incarnation and Creation in the Theology of St. Bonaventure," in *Studies Honoring Ignatius Brady, Friar Minor*, ed. Romano Stephen Almagno and Conrad Harkins (New York: Franciscan Institute, 1976), 320–329; idem, *Hidden Center*, 161–191; idem, "Christology-Cosmology," in *Spirit and Life: A Journal of Contemporary Franciscanism*, vol. 7 of *Franciscan Leadership in Ministry: Foundations in History, Theology and Spirituality*, ed. Anthony Carozzo, Vincent Cushing, and Kenneth Himes (New York: Franciscan Institute, 1997), 41–58.
- 24 Bonaventure "Sermon II on the Nativity," in *What Manner of Man: Sermons on Christ by St. Bonaventure*, trans. Zachary Hayes (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1989), 57–75.
- 25 Zachary Hayes, "Christ, Word of God and Exemplar of Humanity," *Cord*, 46, no. 1 (1996): 6.

- 26 Zachary Hayes, "The Meaning of *Convenientia* in the Metaphysics of St. Bonaventure," *Franciscan Studies*, 34 (1974): 94.
- 27 Hayes, "Christ, Word of God and Exemplar of Humanity," 14; Ilia Delio, "Revisiting the Franciscan Doctrine of Christ," *Theological Studies*, 64 (2003): 10.
- 28 Bonaventure, III Sent. d. 1, a. 2, q. 2, ad 5 (III, 26–27).
- 29 In his book, *The Hidden Center*, Zachary Hayes provides a detailed discussion of the twofold nature of the Incarnation, redemption and completion, in Bonaventure's theology. See Hayes, *The Hidden Center*, 152–191.
- 30 *Ibid.*, 190.
- 31 Zachary Hayes, "Introduction," in *Disputed Questions on the Mystery of the Trinity, vol. III, Works of Saint Bonaventure*, ed. George Marcil (New York: The Franciscan Institute, 1979), 46.
- 32 *Ibid.*, 47.
- 33 Hayes, "Incarnation and Creation in St. Bonaventure," 314.
- 34 *Ibid.*
- 35 Zachary Hayes, "Christology and Metaphysics in the Thought of Bonaventure," *Journal of Religion*, 58 (1978): S91.
- 36 Hayes, "Incarnation and Creation in St. Bonaventure," 314.
- 37 *Ibid.*
- 38 *Ibid.*
- 39 *Ibid.*, 315.
- 40 *Ibid.*
- 41 Bonaventure, III Sent. d. 11, a. 1, q. 2, fund. 4 (III, 245); Hex. 1.27 (V, 334); Hayes, "Meaning of *Convenientia*," 89.
- 42 Hayes, "Meaning of *Convenientia*," 89.
- 43 Zachary Hayes, *Bonaventure: Mystical Writings* (New York: Crossroad, 1999), 112.
- 44 Hayes, "Christology and Metaphysics," S92.
- 45 Hayes, "Incarnation and Creation in St. Bonaventure," 315–316.
- 46 Hayes, "Christ, Word of God and Exemplar of Humanity," 3.
- 47 I am indebted to Robert Ulanowicz, who coined the term "Christophic Principle" based upon our discussion of this paper, which was presented at a science and religion meeting sponsored by the Washington Theological Consortium.
- 48 Bonaventure, "Sermon II on the Nativity," in *What Manner of Man? Sermons on Christ by St. Bonaventure*, 2nd ed., trans. Zachary Hayes (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1989), 74.
- 49 Hayes, "Christ, Word of God and Exemplar of Humanity," 10.
- 50 Hayes, "Christology-Cosmology," 48.
- 51 Delio, "Revisiting the Franciscan Doctrine of Christ," 14–15.
- 52 According to *Webster's Universal College Dictionary* (New York: Random House, 1997), 694, the word "salvation" is defined as: 1. the act of saving or protecting from harm, risk, loss, etc. 2. the state of being so saved or protected, 3. a source, cause, or means of being saved or protected from harm, risk, etc. 4. deliverance from the power and penalty of sin; redemption. For a general discussion on the scriptural meaning of salvation see John L. McKenzie, *Dictionary of the Bible* (New York: Macmillan, 1965), 760–763.
- 53 See, for example, Daryl Dooming, "Evolution, Evil and Original Sin," *America*, vol. 185, no. 15 (November 2001): 19–21; Patricia A. Williams, *Doing Without Adam and Eve: Sociobiology and Original Sin* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2001).
- 54 The theological argument here is that wherever there is a created order there will be a capacity to love within that order since God, who is Creator, is love. Thus, any creation that emerges out of Trinitarian love will bear the pattern of that love according to its created order; hence, the pattern of love, following the model of the Trinity, must be relational. Thus we speculate that even a species with superior intelligence will be able to love, and such love will be communicated or expressed and will be the basis of its salvation.

- 55 Karl Rahner, "Natural Science and Reasonable Faith," in *Theological Investigations*, vol. XXI, trans. Hugh M. Riley (New York: Crossroad, 1988), 51. Rahner uses the word "Logos" to describe the creative principle of God, but this principle is the second divine person of the Trinity and hence Word.
- 56 Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 3 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951–1963), II: 95f.
- 57 Karl Rahner, "Current Problems in Christology," in *Theological Investigations*, vol. I, trans. Cornelius Ernst (Baltimore: Helicon Press, 1961), 188.
- 58 Raimon Panikkar, *Christophany: The Fullness of Man*, trans. Alfred DiLascia (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1970), 144, 147.
- 59 Ibid.
- 60 The term "perichoresis" was first used by the eighth-century theologian, John Damascene, who said that the divine persons of the Trinity are not only related to one another but mutually inhere in one another and draw life from one another. Bonaventure was influenced by the idea of perichoresis but used the Latin instead, *circumincessio*, meaning that the divine persons "move around one another" in a communion of love. See Ilia Delio, *Simply Bonaventure: An Introduction to His Life, Thought and Writings* (New York: New City Press, 2001), 41.
- 61 Panikkar writes: "Jesus Christ as undivided experience constitutes the central Christian dogma. The copula "is" collapses: otherwise, it would introduce an epistemic split of the unity of that experience... Jesus is Christ, but Christ cannot be identified completely with Jesus of Nazareth" (Panikkar, *Christophany*, 150). In the forward to this book, Francis d'Sa writes: "The Christ of the christophany is, for example, the Christ that was, is, and will be at work in the whole of creation, that is, in every single being and not only in Jesus. Jesus is Christ but Christ cannot be identified completely with Jesus" (ibid., xvi).
- 62 Ibid., 147.
- 63 John L. McKenzie, *Dictionary of the Bible*, 436.
- 64 Karl Rahner, "The Two Basic Types of Christology," in *Theological Investigations*, vol. XIII, trans. David Bourke (New York: Seabury Press, 1975), 215–216.
- 65 Panikkar, *Christophany*, 120.
- 66 In terrestrial creation, Christ unites and transforms the created order in God through his death and resurrection. Bonaventure views the cross of Christ as the fullest expression of the triune God of love in history. That which God is—a communion of love—culminates in the complete self-offering of Jesus on the cross, by which we are reconciled to God and completed in divine love. Would the cross be relevant to ET life as well? It is difficult to say. Our logic of thought leads us to suggest that it is not the cross in itself that restores and completes creation in God; rather, it is that which most completely expresses the love of God in a personal act of love by which creatures/creation may be fully reconciled and completed in God. In terrestrial life, the cross is the perfect symbol of divine love and reconciliation; however, in another created order, a more relevant symbol may express divine love in a way that is appropriate to that order.
- 67 The story goes that, one day back on the 1940s, a group of atomic scientists, including the famous Enrico Fermi, were sitting around talking, when the subject turned to extraterrestrial life. Fermi is supposed to have then asked, "So? Where is everybody?" Fermi realized that any civilization with a modest amount of rocket technology and an immodest amount of imperial incentive could rapidly colonize the entire Galaxy. Within a few million years, every star system could be brought under the wing of empire. A few million years may sound long, but in fact it's quite short compared with the age of the Galaxy, which is roughly ten thousand million years. Colonization of the Milky Way should be a quick exercise. What he meant was: If there are all these billions of planets in the universe that are capable of supporting life, and millions of intelligent species out there, then how come none has visited earth? This has come to be known as the "Fermi

Paradox." For a discussion on Fermi's paradox, go to <http://zebu.uoregon.edu/~js/cosmo/lectures/lec28.html>

- 68 Hefner offers a persuasive argument for the development of artificial intelligence based on the quest for a mirror image, a "techno mirror." Basically, artificial intelligence was developed to imitate thinking human beings. According to Hefner, the Kubrick/Spielberg movie *A.I.* challenges artificial intelligence by making love, not intelligence, the critical mark of being human. In a similar way, we may be looking for a mirror image of ET life that is intelligent, one that we can communicate with. If love, however, is the basis for any created order, then perhaps what will unite us with ET life will not be intelligence but love; however, that love may be expressed. See Philip Hefner, *Technology and Human Becoming* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 21–42.

## Biographical Notes

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