2014

Christianity's Many Ways of Salvation: Toward an Irrealistic Salvific Inclusivism

Mark McLeod-Harrison
George Fox University, mmcleodharriso@georgefox.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ccs

Part of the Christianity Commons

Recommended Citation
http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ccs/147

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the College of Christian Studies at Digital Commons @ George Fox University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications - College of Christian Studies by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ George Fox University. For more information, please contact arolfe@georgefox.edu.
Christianity's Many Ways of Salvation
Toward an Irrealistic Salvific Inclusivism

MARK S. McLEOD-HARRISON
George Fox University
College of Christian Studies
Newberg, Oregon
mmcleodharriso@georgefox.edu

Christian salvific exclusivism (CSE) has three components. They are as follows:

(1) There is only one true description of salvific reality and no other description, save the Christian one, is true.¹

This component is typically rooted in an overall commitment to metaphysical realism where (for the most part) reality is what it is and human noetic work does not contribute to the nature of that reality. Exceptions can be made for when my thinking something makes it so that I am thinking and such things as social constructs, for example marriage or legal entities, and so forth. Call this the metaphysical realist component.

(2) Entering into a proper relationship with God through Jesus Christ is necessary and sufficient to be saved. Christ’s incarnate work on earth—birth, death, resurrection—provide the ontological basis for salvation.

Commitment to 1, the metaphysical realist component, commits one to a monistic ontology, whereby I mean that there is only one way the world is (exceptions made as in 1) and that extends to the ontological conditions described by scripture and made true by Jesus himself, hence 2. The nature of that work can ultimately only be described (truly) in one way. Call this the ontological component.

(3) A particular or unique human response grants access to the proper salvific relationship to God through Jesus Christ.

ABSTRACT: Many Christians take an exclusivist stance on the nature and access of salvation. This essay explores the realist assumptions often found behind such exclusivist views and presents an alternative understanding of Christian salvation that is inclusivistic, irrealistic, and pluralistic.

¹ In fact, those who hold to a descriptively realist position about salvation are likely to hold a descriptively realist position about vast stretches of the rest of reality as well. This may rest on their beliefs that God created the world and that it is objectively independent of human thinkers. There are, of course, exceptions to this suggestion, but we needn’t enter that discussion here.
Here it is important to note that in some sense Jesus is the access to salvation. God calls humans into a salvific relationship through the work of Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit. As such, we could say Jesus is the path to salvation in God. The particular or unique human means of accessing that path, as opposed to the path itself, is the focus of this third component. Call this the access component.

One who holds all three components is a Christian salvific exclusivist. Not only is there a singular true description of the (larger) created order but that description includes both a description of the ontological basis for salvation (Christ’s work) and a description of the means of accessing Christ.

I raise some questions about the metaphysical realism and ontological monism that underpins CSE. I also provide a metaphysically irrealist, ontological pluralist account of how salvation could be understood. I do not propose a merely epistemological perspectivalism with an underlying metaphysical realism. Rather, I propose that God and the world, including the salvific realities provided by God, are themselves plural. The plural ways the world is give rise to conflicting but true accounts. There is, in short, more than one means of accessing salvation through the work of Christ both on the access level and on the ontological level. Section I lays out some preliminary comments. Section II presents some general concerns about realism. Section III takes up the positive account, in sketch form, of a metaphysically irrealist, ontologically pluralistic Christian salvation.

I. Alternatives to Christian Salvific Exclusivism

A rejection of CSE is often thought to leave open two basic possibilities, salvific religious pluralism (SRP) and Christian salvific inclusivism (CSI). I won’t take up detailed discussions of these views, but rather make some general comments. First, there are good reasons to reject SRP, no matter its form. Many versions of SRP rely on antirealist accounts of truth (epistemic or deflationary) as well as antirealist metaphysics. I use the term “antirealist” when thinking of global accounts of human noetic influence on reality reserving the term “irrealist” for my nearly global account. There is a realist component to my view and hence it is not nonrealist all the way down. Good grounds exist philosophically to reject antirealist views and insofar as SRP relies on antirealism, good grounds to reject SRP. Truly global antirealist metaphysics tend to create various infinite regress problems and they grant human beings far too much creative power, power we just don’t have. The irrealism I propose is not as radical as global antirealism. In fact, it requires the existence and creative activity of God to side-step the infinite regress

issues often involved in antirealism. Nevertheless, it is a nearly global irrealism.

CSI is usually rooted in a realist metaphysic and a strictly realist account of truth (often correspondence) which are the same positions (typically) underlying CSE. While I hold a realist account of truth, I reject correspondence as the basis. I further believe that the realist metaphysic or parts of it are questionable. But if that metaphysic is faulty, another alternative is needed. What follows proposes an alternative both to SRP and CSI that allows the truth of traditional Christianity yet rejects the faulty metaphysic standing behind both CSE and CSI.

Before presenting a brief case for metaphysical irrealism, note how CSI is typically thought to work. Perhaps the most common sort of strategy used, one I’ve used myself, is to appeal to direct reference as a means of referring to God. Thus one could be an inclusivist about salvific access (one can access the work of Christ in many ways, even if one doesn’t know one is) but an exclusivist about the ontological basis of salvation (the work of Christ) and therefore an exclusivist about the truth of the Gospel. God exists and is who God is totally independent of human conceptual or epistemic schemes and regardless of various human means of accessing the divine provision of salvation. God creates humans and the world and they are what they are more or less completely independent of human conceptual or epistemic schemes.

On these assumptions, salvation would occur in CSI by the work of Christ and the larger salvific story of Christianity. However, any given person might be referring to the work of Christ even though systematically making mistakes about the thing to which she refers. For example, a dedicated Buddhist might refer to his enlightenment and subsequent real love of other people in solely Buddhist terms. But he might be, unbeknown to him, actually referring to the work of Jesus Christ in his life. What is true is the Christian story. It includes a description of the ontological basis for the salvation of some (and perhaps many) who otherwise don’t know they are being saved by the work of Christ. One could thus be an (access) inclusivist about salvation while remaining a metaphysical realist. God, Jesus and, indeed, most everything in the world would be what they are independent of having human noetic support. One could therefore be an ontological monist about the basis for salvation (the work of Christ). The Christian scriptures themselves suggest that the Hebrew saints of old were saved by faith. Whatever faith they had, it surely wasn’t in the work of Christ as Christians typically understand that work. Sarah and Abraham did not believe in Jesus’s work on the cross. The


direct reference account might be the very way by which God includes various Hebrew saints (from before Jesus’s time) into the Christian salvific plan.

While an attractive way to think of inclusivism (and I will appeal to a parallel below), in the end it should be rejected because the metaphysical realism on which it rests is suspect. The good news is, there are ways of being inclusivist while rejecting a strict metaphysical realism and one can do so without losing the core of Christian orthodoxy. Note that those alternatives do not entail moving all the way from metaphysical realism to antirealism and the off-stage SRP attending to it, a pluralism many traditional Christians are concerned to reject. In other words, the argument I propose does not reject the notion that the Christian God exists independent of human noetic work, at least at the divine core. God is the ultimate creator, not humans. Nor does the view reject a realist (albeit minimalist) theory of truth, even though it is not committed to a full-orbed correspondence theory of truth. I call the general view “theistic irrealism,” and I’ve defended it elsewhere in detail. What follows is merely an application of theistic irrealism to Christian salvation.

II. What’s Wrong with Realism?

What of the metaphysical realism assumed in CSE’s background? It’s often claimed that what is is not influenced by our epistemic or, more generally, our noetic contributions. The hinge-point can be summarized in a mantra: epistemology is not metaphysics! This section contains a general argument against metaphysical realisms of the sort claiming that there is (basically) only one true description of the universe and that in all but harmless sorts of ways (such as when my having an idea makes it the case that I’m having an idea) human noetic machinations do not make the world the way it is.

In its place, I will propose a theistic irrealism. Why theistic? Irrealism faces a number of challenges that I can’t rehearse. Yet one central issue must be at least briefly discussed, namely, that the irrealism I propose requires the existence of God. This God is not merely “made up” by human thought but is a God who is omniscient, omnipresent, omnipotent, loving and freely creative. God must be present, for God is needed to stop the sorts of pernicious regresses (mentioned above) found in antirealistic theories.


But before we get to irrealism, let’s consider what’s wrong with realism. Here’s the general argument.

(A) It is impossible that both $p$ and $\neg p$ be true (in the same conceptual scheme).

(B) If $p$ and $\neg p$ are both true, then there is more than one conceptual scheme such that $p$ is true in one and $\neg p$ in another.

(C) It is possible that both $p$ and $\neg p$ are true.

(D) $p$.

(E) $\neg p$.

(F) Therefore both $p$ and $\neg p$ are true.

(G) Therefore, there is more than one conceptual scheme such that $p$ is true in one and $\neg p$ true in another.

(H) Therefore, what is true is conceptual-scheme relative.

Moving from C to D and E appears questionable. At that juncture, we must be very clear and careful. No epistemic or noetic valuing of the various premises can be introduced into the argument. *To do so is to already grant that metaphysical claims are not independent of noetic work.* It is tempting to reject F because we “know” that either D or E is false. But that already assumes a realist interpretation of the law of noncontradiction and we have another place where we grant that metaphysical claims are not independent of noetic work. But the realist insists that we not sneak epistemic or noetic contributions into any of our metaphysical claims. So unless we want to move to skepticism about metaphysical propositions, the scales tip toward some sort of irrealism.

Consider this supporting argument.

(1) Either our conceptualizing-epistemizing premises A, D, and E contributes to A, D, and E being the case or it does not. (Alternatively: our conceptualizing the world makes A and D the case or A and E the case but not both.)

(2) If our conceptualizing-epistemizing A, D, and E contributes to A, D, and E being the case, then irrealism obtains. (Alternatively: if our conceptualizing the world makes either A and D the case or A and E the case but not both, then irrealism obtains.)

(3) If our conceptualizing-epistemizing A, D, and E does not contribute to A, D, and E being the case, then the irrealist argument is successful, and irrealism obtains. (Alternatively: if our conceptualizing the world does not make either A and D the case or A and E the case

259–76; and for the full-length treatment, *Make/Believing the World(s).*
but not both, then the irrealist argument is successful and irrealism obtains.)

(4) Therefore, irrealism obtains.

Taken straightforwardly, premise 2 simply gives us irrealism. Suppose we epistemize A, D, and E according to one conceptual framework rather than another. That is, suppose that we conceptualize the world such that either D or E turns out to be true. The antecedent of 2 then is either true or false. If it is true, then the truth of A, D, and E depends somehow on our conceptualizing-epistemizing them. That in turn rests on our conceptualizing the world one way rather than another, in which case there is surely more than one way the world is and no reason apart from our conceptualizing the world to pick one over the other. There simply is more than one way to conceptualize-epistemize A, D, and E. What is true is thus conceptual-scheme relative. Irrealism obtains. On the other hand, if the antecedent of 2 is false, then the truth of A, D, and E has nothing to do with conceptualizing-epistemizing. Thus conceptualizing-epistemizing is irrelevant to the irrealist argument presented above. This irrelevance drives a large wedge between epistemology and metaphysics, precisely what the realist typically claims. Thus 3 comes into play.

The antecedent of 3 says that the truth of A, D, and E is in no way shaped by our conceptualizing-epistemic stance toward A, D, and E. So, if we do not in any way conceptualize-epistemize the premises of the main argument, then we cannot appeal to reasons to reject any of the premises. That leaves three possibilities with regard to the truth or falsity of A, D, and E. However, before exploring those possibilities, it is important to note that the discussion is not focused on defending the truth of A, D, and E (that would be to rank them epistemically) but rather on understanding what actual epistemic neutrality looks like in regard to this argument. So the issue isn’t whether we have evidence for or against the truth of any of the premises. If we had such evidence, it would be because we had already conceptualized the world one way rather than another. We must first have a conceptualized world in order to have reasons. The real question is, since we can’t appeal to such evidence, how are we to treat A, D, and E? It looks like the position that claims all the premises are true is at least as viable as any other position—in fact superior to some—and therefore the argument goes through.

Let’s consider the possible combinations of truth values. First, let’s suppose all the premises are false. Because all three are false, A is false. But then contradictions would be possible and that is a fate worse than irrealism, for then anything goes. We are left with a complete antirealism, a fully unconstrained extreme relativism. So if we get irrealism if A, D, and E are true, we get a radical kind of antirealism if A is false. The second possibility is that some of A, D, and E are true and others false. But which? If A is false, then we have a complete relativism. That leaves us with D and E. While it’s
possible that one is true and the other not, without introducing some reason to pick one over another (which, by assumption, we cannot do, for that is to have already conceptualized the world) we look to be on shaky ground. Why should we take the situation one way rather than another? According to the realist dichotomy between epistemology and ontology, believing, knowing, taking, accepting, and so forth, have nothing to do (generally) with the way reality is. In remaining epistemically neutral, we cannot, by supposition, epistemically rank-order the premises one way or another. That leaves the third possibility, that A, D, and E are all true. But then F, G, and H follow, and irrealism obtains. One could suggest that evidence can be marshaled against the joint truth of A, D, and E. But to marshal such evidence is to epistemize the premises, for we will have already conceptualized the world one way rather than another. Again, we can’t do that, by supposition. Hence if we are consistent in not introducing epistemic rank-ordering, the irrealist argument is successful, and irrealism obtains.

Realism is stuck between the rock of admitting that conceptualizing—epistemizing contributes to the metaphysical nature of the world and, alternatively, the hard place of skepticism. But actually the irrealist can press another issue here, pushing the realist into an even worse position. As it turns out, there is no noncircular way of being a realist, once the realist retreats to the position of admitting that realism could be wrong about the way the world is. Premise A is metaphysically neutral between there being a singular world and multiple worlds. That is, although A is taken to be true, there is no built-in commitment to a singular-world realist interpretation of the law of noncontradiction over against an irrealist interpretation. An irrealist not only can desire to hold onto A but is certainly free to as well. One difference between the realist and the irrealist on this score is that the irrealist truly remain open to where the argument might go. The irrealist who remains epistemically neutral about A, D, and E actually doesn’t beg any epistemic questions about them. By remaining neutral in this way, the irrealist gets the conclusions, F, G, and H. About this, the irrealist is quite sanguine.

Can the realist avoid these irrealist conclusions? Can the realist proffer any reason to defend the single-world interpretation of A? No, except, perhaps, to assert that there is only one way the world is along with the singular-world realist interpretation of the law of noncontradiction. But that is the realist thesis itself and it begs the question against the irrealist position. Realism is not the default position on these matters. Irrealism is on ground just as solid. In fact, irrealism is, I submit, on better ground.

The realist might say, in a final attempt at defense, that on the grounds of the irrealist argument, circular reasoning is acceptable. We know that a proposition follows from itself, if we stick to logic. “p therefore p” is perfectly valid, deductively. “Realism is true” follows from “realism is true.” So what’s wrong with begging the question against the irrealist position?
The irrealist retort is simple: Go ahead, but that appeal to logic stripped of epistemology proves the irrealist point and doesn’t help the realist at all. There are many odd things about deductive logic, stripped of all epistemic concerns. One of them is that logic alone cannot tell us anything about the world. Logic is at best neutral vis-à-vis these matters. The irrealist does not end up in the same skeptical boat because at least the irrealist has provided an argument. The irrealist provides A, D, and E. And it looks like one can substitute whatever one wishes for \( p \) and \( \neg p \). Pick your favorite metaphysical issue and take from it two contradictory claims. All the irrealist needs is some argument with contradictory statements substituted for \( p \) and \( \neg p \). She need not offer those as epistemically ranked propositions. She need only offer the bare logic of the situation. She needs no other reason. The strict separation of epistemic concerns from metaphysical ones opens the door to irrealism, just the opposite result from what a typical realist might suspect.

One might have further questions about the first premise of the argument. One might, for example, worry that it “front loads” an ontological pluralism in from the beginning. There are certainly issues about the status of the law of noncontradiction on which premise 1 rests. I can’t settle those here. In fact, I’m not aware of anyone who has made a very good case as to why the law is so central to the way the world is or the way we think about the world. We all just take it to be the case. I propose as one plausible way to think about the law is that it has a dual, metaphysical/epistemological basis in the mind of God. So, the law is what it is because God’s thoughts ultimately make it so. God’s making it so, however, need not commit one to some sort of Cartesian relativity on the matter. God’s very thoughts and God’s very nature may be so closely aligned that the law is fixed. Once it is set into place, however, it applies within each and every conceptual scheme or it simply applies to the world (on a realist account of the world). In short, the argument does not get irrealism off the ground because it is premised on a kind of perspectivalism, for example, \( p \) and \( \neg p \) only mean what they mean because they are properties of a conceptual scheme vs. assessed as “mind-independent facts.” One can simply drop the parenthetical clause from premise 1, remaining neutral on the status of the law of noncontradiction.

So, the overall view developed here does not commit us to the position that truth is dependent on the noetic contribution of humans. The concept of truth can be understood, following William Alston, as minimal and one can construct a realist, if minimalist, account of truth. Nevertheless, what is dependent on human noetic work is the way the world is even though truth is not thus dependent. What makes “\( p \)” true is \( p \). Such an account of truth is

---

8. One of the journal reviewers made a comment to this effect. Besides these brief comments here, I’ve dealt with the issue at length in *Make/Believing the World(s)*, 210–18.
9. This is a paraphrase of some comments of a journal reviewer.
not epistemic or deflationary. So even though various and substantial aspects
of the world are made by human noetic work, what makes a proposition true
is the way the world ends up being within the various conceptual schemes
and not the conceptual or epistemic schemes themselves. Being true is a real
property (and hence truth is not deflated) and it does not itself depend on hu-
man noetic contributions (and hence truth is not epistemic). The world itself,
however, does depend on our noetic contributions.

Here’s an application of the main argument drawing on two specific
claims about Christian salvation.

(I) It is impossible that both $P$, one has access to the salvific ontology
by faith alone, and $\neg P$, one has access to the salvific ontology by
works alone, be true (in a single conceptual scheme).

(J) If $P$ and $\neg P$ are both true, then there is more than one conceptual
scheme such that $P$ is true in one and $\neg P$ in another.

(K) It is possible that both $P$ and $\neg P$ are true.

(L) $P$.

(M) $\neg P$.

(N) Therefore both $P$ and $\neg P$ are true.

(O) Therefore, there is more than one conceptual scheme such that $P$ is
true in one and $\neg P$ true in another.

The accounts of faith versus works need to be spelled out carefully in
order to get an actual contradiction between L and M. Here is a quick attempt
at that spelling out.

Often faith is thought of as including works. Faith without works is
dead, says James. To be clear, however, let’s say someone comes to faith on
her deathbed and has no time to develop a working life of faith. Assuming
that her faith is not, in fact, a type of work, such a person on $P$ has what it
takes to access the work of Jesus Christ in terms of salvation, and she will
be in the proper salvific relationship with God. Had she lived, of course, she
might very well have developed a working life of faith. But theologically,
her faith is expressed by her works. Her works are not (by themselves, let’s
say) enough for (or in some sense, even relevant to) her salvation. Faith is
needed and is, so far forth, enough. But in the contradictory statement (works
alone give one access to salvation), the person believes that her works are
the means of access to God’s provision of salvation. Such a person thinks
God asks of her to be a good person, to love her neighbor and so forth.
While she believes in God, her believe is an intellectual assent rather than a
fiduciary relationship of trust. If asked, she would say she will enter heaven
not because of her belief but because God will judge how well she lived. Her
actions show, she might say, that she tried to live as Christ wants her to live
and that grants her access to the salvific framework provided by Jesus. We might even say, theologically, that her work is expressed by her faith, just the reverse to the faith-alone person described above. She may even have to work at her intellectual belief in God. Now, it seems, we have a contradiction; \( P \) and \( \sim P \) are actually contradictory. If that doesn’t satisfy the reader, one can just replace my suggestions with one to her liking. For example, \( P \) could be “saved by faith alone” while \( \sim P \) is “saved by something other than faith alone.”

I remind the reader that the move from \( K \) to \( L \) and \( M \) must be carefully considered so as to introduce no epistemic valuation. If such valuation is introduced, irrealism is already admitted. But if one is careful, then what is true will be shown to be relative to conceptual schemes. Nevertheless, even with this caution, the argument’s conclusion will perhaps still be met with skepticism by the hard-core metaphysical realist and likely met with an even more strident skepticism by many Christians. Such skepticism often seems more existential than strictly rational or evidential, and I encourage the reader to look beyond her immediate intuitive response to see the good that can come out of understanding reality in the irrealist way before simply rejecting (or ignoring) the argument.

III. Irrealistic Christian Salvific Inclusivism

Here I turn to a positive account of irrealistic CSI. Where does the argument leave us? One direction would be to take such theological claims as \( P \) and \( \sim P \) as completely antirealist in nature so that their ontological status is entirely brought about by humans epistemically or conceptually. I reject this approach. First, the resulting antirealism simply puts too much power in the hands—or minds—of humans. We don’t make things up from whole-cloth as some more radical antirealists seem to suggest. Second, such a view makes nonsense out of much of the Christian tradition. As William Alston notes, we are loved by God and it would be odd to think that we are loved by nothing more than a figment of our conceptual schemes.\(^{11}\) Third, it would be strange, indeed, that humans create the very thing worthy of worship. But the radical antirealist approach is not the only route that can be taken, nor the best one for traditional Christians. There is, instead, another road. The basic idea is that God at the divine core is not dependent upon human conceptual or epistemic schemes but insofar as humans interact with the divine, God is shaped by our noetic contributions.

Human conceptual schemes can shape how God is vis-à-vis human interaction but not at the divine core because there are thin properties shared

---

across all conceptual schemes ("virtual absolutes") and those are thickened up via human noetic work in each conceptual scheme.\textsuperscript{12} The thin properties describe God’s core. For example, we might say, thinly, that God is omnipresent, omniscient, omnipotent, omnibenevolent and creator. These properties can truly be predicated of God no matter in which conceptual scheme they are spoken. However, there’s not much meat on those bones. God and the thin properties must be thickened up in a (human) conceptual scheme. While everyone may agree that God is omnipotent (let’s say, being able to do whatever is logically possible) there are many theories people propose about it. It is at the level of theory and thinking that God’s properties get thickened up into the way God is in a given conceptual scheme.

Here one must talk about a certain sort of eschatological component to theistic irrealism, for many proposed conceptual schemes attempt to exclude God. Such exclusions are, it could be suggested, wallpapering schemes where God is ignored. Yet since God is the creator, God cannot, in the end, be ignored metaphysically for God is needed as the underpinning of human creative work. The main point here, and in terms of Christian orthodoxy, is that God is, and is across and in all (well-formed) conceptual schemes. No human conceptualizing will change God at this core level.

But at the thick level, the level at which God interacts with us, God is different across conceptual schemes. The thick properties describe how God is, so to speak, logically after interaction with human conceptual schemes. On the level of thick properties what turns out to be true in one conceptual scheme is contradictory to what is true in other conceptual schemes. How God’s omnipotence is in one conceptual scheme is not the same and, in fact, can be quite contradictory to, how it is in another conceptual scheme. And so with omniscience, omnipresence, omnibenevolence, and creativity.

Of course, there is more to the Christian God than the properties just discussed. Let’s take the Nicene Creed as a basic thin description of God and the divine relationship to the world. The Nicene Creed is full of metaphor as well as literal description of God, but a fully detailed account of theistic irrealism will have to allow for metaphorical truths just as all good Christian theology must. Setting that issue aside for now, the main point is that the various claims of the creed can rest on thin properties that are filled out more thickly according to the many ways of understanding the creed. There are limits of course. But the central salvific issue is that all the claims about God becoming incarnate in the historical Jesus—his life, death, and resurrection—can be thinly understood as true in all conceptual schemes but thickly true in some conceptual schemes and not others.

\textsuperscript{12} The basic idea of thin versus thick properties as a means of help explain ontological pluralism is borrowed from Michael Lynch as is the notion of virtual absolutes. See his \textit{Truth in Context} (Boston: MIT Press, 1999), 55–75.
Let’s apply these general suggestions more specifically to the question of salvation. Let’s say Mary holds ~P while Joseph holds P. On these suppositions, it is true in one conceptual scheme that God saves Mary by the work of Christ while she accesses salvation by works alone. It is true in another conceptual scheme that God saves Joseph by the work of Christ while he accesses salvation through faith alone. The difference is how each individual Christian (or more likely, her larger socially, theologically, and conceptually connected set of Christian compatriots) conceptualizes her access to the salvific relationship with Christ. The result is an inclusivist account of salvation’s access with an exclusive ontological base in the incarnation, life and work of Jesus Christ. If the thin description of access to Christ’s work were “come follow me,” the thicker descriptions would include what that looks like, right down, perhaps, to the individual’s specific needs. The rich young ruler needed to give up his goods to follow Jesus, Nicodemus to be born again, the women at the well to broaden her theology and conception of God, Peter to overcome his wide emotional swings, Paul to give up his hardened, pharisaical ways, Martha to walk away from her ties to the kitchen, and the Canaanite woman to engage Jesus in a theological argument. Of course, in each case there is more to the access to Jesus’s work, but each of us comes into relationship with Christ with our own thoughts, fears, needs, and conceptions of Jesus and his work. Some of these folk engaged Jesus before his work on earth was over. Some only after, and some both. But in each case, the ontological grounding of salvation (the total work of Christ) comes into play for the individual human in and through their own thoughts, beliefs, attitudes, and so forth. That is, through their conceptual schemes.

But it is not just human access that is shaped by our circumstances and hence our conceptual schemes, but the work of Jesus himself. Perhaps the various accounts of the atonement are all true, in their respective conceptual schemes. So the substitutionary, moral, and ransom accounts are all accurate; just true in different conceptual schemes. If such is the case, it does not deny the virtual fact of Christ's work on the cross. There is a thin account of Christ’s death and resurrection that holds in all conceptual schemes, given in summary form in the Nicene Creed. Thus there is an exclusivism involved in the claims of Christianity. An exclusivism of the thin reality as God is present and active via the incarnation and the subsequent presence of the Holy Spirit. But all the competing claims in thick accounts are true (assuming that each conceptual scheme generates a coherent, complete account). The thick accounts are just not true in every conceptual scheme. Thus there is an objectivity to the presence and reality of God and God’s salvific work. But there is also a broad range of competing and yet fully true ways God is in the world. The salvific work of Christ is actual, but irrealistically so, rooted both in the human conceptual work and the mysterious reality who is the God of Christianity.
Returning to the three components of CSE with which this essay began, I'm suggesting that 3 is false. There are many means of accessing the work of Christ mentioned in 2. Each of these ways are true (or could be, if complete, coherent, and so forth) because what is true is relative to its embedding conceptual scheme. Furthermore, how we understand 2 can be broadly construed and each of the ways it is construed—even where they contradict one another—are true because of the conceptual scheme in which they are embedded. That is, the world and its salvific framework are themselves different in different conceptual schemes. Finally, the various true versions of the means of accessing salvation may be coordinated logically (in some instances, at least) with the various true versions of the nature of salvation, the nature of sin, the atonement, and even the nature of Christ found in various conceptual schemes. The differences occur on the thick level, whereas on the thin level, the description is universal across all conceptual schemes.

Even if all this is correct, I've done nothing to explain how those outside the Christian tradition access the work of Christ for salvation. This account does not limit access to the work of Christ to Christians per se. It may turn out that those who are un-, ill-, or mis-informed of the work of Christ can still access the salvific work of Christ. Perhaps even those who make a free decision to reject Christ (say because of some deep harm done by the church) are not self-condemned but could be saved by the work of Christ via some apparently non-Christian means of access to that gracious work of God.

At this point the Christian critic might suggest that no matter how much one’s conceptual scheme is stretched, it must ultimately include some connection to what I’ve called the “thin” account of God, the work of Christ, and the power of the Holy Spirit. A Buddhist, no matter how sincere, is simply not relying of the work of Christ. But here we can introduce a parallel to the referential account suggested by Alston and noted above. The Buddhist might very well be referring to the work of Christ even though systematically misdescribing the source of her salvation. We might recall the very important eschatological aspects of theistic irrealism referred to briefly earlier. The atheist, whether Buddhist or Western post-enlightenment, may very well be referring to God’s salvific work in her or his life and thereby be saved. Humanity looks on the stature of a person whereas God looks at the heart, as the scriptures report. There is so much more to an actual Christ-like life than believing or saying “the right things” that we seem on shaky ground to rule out how God’s grace might work in cases outside the Christian faith itself.

The modified direct reference approach just noted would open doors, perhaps, to a richer, more serious, approach to cross-religious “dialogue.” Often religious dialogue for traditional Christians turns out to be a tool to show where other religions are false. If we want a real dialogue from which one can learn how to think Christianly about various matters, remaining committed to the core account of the Christian faith is possible on theistic ir-
realism while also remaining open to not only hear but perhaps to appropriate various descriptions of God from other religious perspectives. This general point is true not only of God but of various other broadly theological issues as well—anthropology, perhaps, or the nature of sin. A good many conceptual understandings and tools could be found in non-Christian religions that would help Christians develop better and fuller conceptual approaches to the way God is. I fear we (traditional) Christians oft-time miss such insights for fear of “getting things wrong” according to our own tradition. With theistic irrealism and openness to inclusivism vis-à-vis human access to salvation, we might be able to take our neighbors more seriously as people who are saved but who have insights we don’t have. They, too, are in God’s image and they too are creators of conceptual schemes.

The critic might also suggest that there is no reason to think Christianity is the only true religion. Why not take a similar approach from the point of view of Buddhism or Islam, claiming that there is a thin version of one or the other of these religions that can be thickened up in various ways and that the (Buddhist or Muslim) thin version provides the ultimate ontological basis for salvation via a sort of direct reference? In response, I admit that nothing developed here shows that Christianity is the true religion. While in other places I’ve tried to show that theistic irrealism and the concomitant ontological pluralism is consistent with orthodox Christianity, there is nothing, so far forth, to show that only Christianity can support theistic irrealism. Indeed, Islam and Judaism, along with other theistic religious traditions might work as well. However, the nontheistic religions will not, I believe. The reason, in brief, is that theistic irrealism requires a mind such as God’s to provide for necessities and to stop the pernicious regresses mentioned above. However I would add that theistic irrealism is open to the possibility of various apologetic approaches to the various religions to seek to discover which of the many is the true one at the core level. That project should be encouraged so long as it is taken up in the mode and spirit of open dialogue rather than closed judgment, the same as one might on metaphysical realism.

This proposal has one advantage over realism, however. Ecumenical approaches to doctrine in general often seem to strip down the content of the Christian believer’s commitments to some very bare bones, far more bare than the Nicene Creed would suggest. With the additional (and legitimate) concerns of those outside the Christian faith that their doctrinal voices be heard, appreciated, and not rejected out of hand, ecumenism sometimes moves to more or less empty Christian propositions of their “literal” meaning and/or their claim to truth. Such striping down leaves one with a sort of SRP rather than something peculiarly Christian. One who holds to irrealistic CSI does not need to move to SRP.
I’d like to respond also to some good questions from an anonymous reviewer. She or he first asked whether the view presented here is really a panentheistic rather than a theistic irrealism. It’s a good question. After Philip Clayton (as hearty a panentheist as any) read the book on which this essay is based, he wondered the same thing. There are some affinities but in the end they are not the same, although God might be irrealistically panentheistic. Nevertheless, God in panentheism seems to emerge (more of less entirely) out of the natural order, a view I reject. Perhaps there is an “antecedent” way God is that is influenced on the “consequent” level because of the way the natural order is. That mirrors in some ways what I’ve said. But even with that, nothing in panentheism per se involves human conceptualizing making God one way rather than another. There is no clear pluralism in, for example, Clayton’s work. Could the model of God’s omniscience that attends panentheism be one of the ways God’s omniscience is (in one of the human conceptual schemes)? Yes, I think so.

Second, how does one know whether one is developing an adequate thickly true understanding of God within some conceptual scheme given the pluralism of irrealism? Well, the “rightness” of our theory and ontology building is rooted in at least three things: God, God’s communication to us, and our own reasoned, emotional, human responses. Like all theory building, one takes the data one has and tries to explain it in the most cogent and complete way possible. While many Christians don’t spend most of their time working on theology, most of us do spend some time on it. Can one ever be completely sure one is “getting it right?” It is important to remember that one of the primary modes of being in God’s image is creative. Adam’s earliest tasks included naming the animals, and the primary (though not the only) thing we learn about God in the Genesis account is that God is immensely creative. The creative image of God in Adam included not just naming the animals but creating the whole new category of “livestock.” That could be taken as the creation of new ontological categories via a conceptual scheme. But the main point is that we need to continue working on our creations to make them the best they can be. This, of course, is all done in history and within the inherited accounts of God we have from scripture and tradition—including from our parents and immediate peers. One doesn’t thicken God up out of whole cloth. It comes cut and shaped before we get started. When we modify it, there will be false starts, places where we have to sew the cloth again, patch, and so forth. The actual criteria for getting things right are manifold, but include coherence, faithfulness to the past, faithfulness to scripture, faithfulness to the social community in which we live, whether the account sheds light on various bits of data, creative insights that expand the greatness of God, and so on. Of course, like in all accounts of theorizing, the

13. This list of questions was raised by an anonymous reviewer for the journal. I thank that person for good comments and wise advice on a paper rushed too soon to the journal.
theorizing is never complete but historical. The theories are always developing and expanding. But in the end, we can never "get outside" the theory to check it against "reality." We are making reality by the theorizing. On theistic irrealism large aspects of reality are generated out of our conceptual schemes and thus we are, in some respects, closer to reality on this view and there is, therefore, less room for skepticism than on realism.

The next three questions are linked. Why should one thicken-up? What is the motivation? What does it really accomplish given what thinly understood conceptions already accomplish? There is a misunderstanding, perhaps, in these questions. First, one has no choice but to thicken up. Take a nontheological example. Suppose a number of philosophers are talking about a concept, say death. The thin concept might be captured by the notion "cessation of life." All the philosophers agree to that thin notion. But it doesn't do much work in, let's say, accounts of the meaningfulness of death. Each of the philosophers might take the thin concept in very different directions. One might think cessation of life comes to brain cessation, another to heart cessation, another to separation of soul from body, and another, spiritual cessation (the end of the soul rather than the body). These thickened notions of death play a role in the conceptual scheme of each philosopher that the thinner notion simply won't capture. The philosophers have to thicken out the concept in order for the theoretical work (and indeed, the ontological work) to be done. So it is with God's thin properties. There are a variety of ways of thickening up the notion of omnipotence—along, let's say, Whiteheadian/Hartshornian lines, along traditional perfect being theological lines, along open theistic lines, and so forth. While the basic notion of omnipotence (can do anything logically possible) would be agreed to by all the philosophers, what it comes to when thickened up will be quite different in various conceptual schemes and hence God's omnipotence is different in each of these schemes.

As to motivation and what is actually accomplished, the answers are fairly short. First, the motivation is just that we are making ways the world is because it is a God-placed creativity within us. We have a propensity to create because God is creative and we are God's image. Second, what is accomplished is just a making of the way the world is, God is, we are, and so forth. But all of this is descriptive of what we do and does not supply a reason why we do should it. We are creative and therefore the conceptual thickening needs to be explained rather than motivated. In this sense, these last three questions seem somewhat misguided.

A further question. If one doesn't know whether one is developing an adequate thickly true understanding of God, doesn't that create a lot of existential worry about whether one is getting it "right"? This is an important question. Elsewhere I've developed an argument noting some internal reasons to reject what I take to be the functional belief in CSE. By "functional" belief I mean to suggest that many Christians function as if CSE is true, even if there
is little or no official church recognition of the belief. One of those reasons to reject CSE is that there is the possibility of an existential crisis of faith that develops in one’s spiritual life—a worry that one has gotten it wrong. But does the irrealistic account fare any better on the existential question? In reply one can observe that the difference between realism and irrealism in the salvific context is that someone who is deeply committed to CSE may be concerned much more about “getting it right” because there are so many ways to go wrong. The irrealist, in contrast, can relax, knowing first that she is “on the way” to a right rendering of the world and that there are, in fact, multiple ways of creating an appropriate way the world is.

And the final question. Does theistic irrealism commit one to open theism? I don’t think so, although an open theistic account of God certainly seems to be one of the ways God is. However, there is an eschatological component to theistic irrealism. Not any account of God will pass muster in the end. There are limits to the ways in which we can “build” God. But those limits are not so narrow that there is only one way God is in the eschaton. We will all, so to speak, live in relationship with the God we have “made.” But the God we will have made will not be made willy-nilly. God’s core can never be wallpapered over, any more than God’s existence can be. Those of us who construct an open God, insofar as that ontology pleases God, will live with that open God. Those of us who construct a Calvinist God, insofar as that ontology pleases God, will live with that Calvinist God. And so on. God is not static even in the divine core. Insofar as one thinks God is entirely immutable at the divine core, one will be unhappy with the view developed here.

That someone is committed to the absolute immutability of God does nothing to theistic irrealism. Such an absolute commitment may be little more than an undeveloped metaphysical realism about God. I propose that theistic irrealism gets at the underpinnings of our various conflicting ontologies—our ways of taking God—by making God various ways. Those conflicting ontologies, however, are not really competing ontologies. That is, they are not competing in the sense that they are all trying to describe the monistic or singular way the world is. Instead, they are all true (at least they will be, in the eschaton) and hence not in competition with one another. One of the strengths of theistic irrealism is that we can spend our time discussing or explaining things rather than trying to win arguments. But those discussions or explanations are not ever finished here. Right now, while we toil away at our earthly tasks, our various ways of constructing God (and other things as well) are incomplete, shortsighted, sometimes vague, and so forth. We are, I believe, in the business of building ways the world is, not in the business of selling the final version of the real estate.

One way to think of how we shape God via our conceptual schemes is to think of how we shape, for example, our spouses. After long years spent
together my spouse is changed by the ways in which I think of her. Most of our social relationships are like this. Our relationship with God even more so. But it is two-way street. Not only is my spouse changed by my ways of thinking but I, too, am changed by my spouse’s ways of thinking about me. So much more so with God. God’s core is love and essentially so. God’s interactions with us are meant to bring us into full and forever relationships with the divine love. God invites us to enter such relationships by God’s graciously encouraging us to shape and mold God. God and the salvation God provides are of course rooted in the divine core of love, but love “is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.” Perhaps God endures a lot of stretching to encourage us to be in a relationship with the divine self that we can grasp. Perhaps, indeed, theistic irrealism is the ultimate in incarnational theology. But the point, in the end, of incarnational theology is to help us along the road to being like God. In the give and take of marriage, we are to learn to love. In the give and take of divine relationship, not just at a spiritual-formation level but a theoretical level as well, we are to learn to love. We are shaped, however, by God more than God is shaped by us. That doesn’t entail, however, that God isn’t shaped by us. Salvation, ultimately, is about us being shaped more fully into the image of God. That image, however, is at least partly dependent on us. But only partly. God’s voice is heard in the eschaton. But rather than merely being a voice of judgment about how we have faulty beliefs about God, it will be a voice perhaps saying that God appreciates our efforts at shaping the divine self—but do you think it needs a little tweaking on this score? Not just anything will go in the theistic irrealistic eschaton. But probably more will go than is typically allowed on the metaphysically realist account to which traditional Christian theology is so often thought to be tied. All of this recognizes the deep historicity of the human person. God’s salvation is not just an abstract, one size fits all. It is personal, individual, and historical. That, in the end, is what Christ’s incarnational provision of salvation is all about.