Drew Collins. *The Unique and Universal Christ: Refiguring the Theology of Religions.* Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2021. xiv+240 pp. $54.99 (hbk).

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At the outset of Collins's *The Unique and Universal Christ* he notes the relatively late arrival of discussion surrounding Christian theology of religions as such onto the proverbial scene. Of course, Christian has been talking about the beliefs and soteriological status of those in other religious groups – not to mention those within various intra-Christian sects![1] – since the earliest days of the Church, but theology of religions as such is far more recent. Collins notes that "from the start of the century up to the 1960s-1970s, this as yet unnamed discourse was mainly explored as a matter of missiology" (1), yet it developed into a more "abstract and academic matter" (2) as it progressed in the face of mounting secular challenges to the possible validity of Christian belief due to the world's manifestly variegated religious landscape. As this development continued Alan Race's threefold typology of Christian theologies as "exclusivist," "inclusivist," or "pluralist" emerged as a leading categorical method in the theology of religions, and it is against the grain of this predominant typology that Collins runs this book's major argument.

Across its span, Collins presses the reader to see that Race's typology "is not simply incomplete, as if more categories are needed, and not simply defective, as if it merely fails to describe its objects, but that it only arises in light of and attends to concerns about the philosophical legitimacy of religious faith" (4). At bottom, per Collins, the threefold typology is polemical and apologetic, reflecting "a very specific, and controversial, understanding of Christian theology itself" (7). And so, he moves instead to suggest that "in the context of theology of religions, it is not the conclusions of any one type but *the construal of Christian theology itself* that merits typological consideration" (7). Pulling no punches, Collins contends that "Race's typology is neither theologically sound nor historically illuminating" (8) and we would be better served in doing theology of religions via a reappraisal of Hans Frei's fivefold typology of Christian theology. The book does this across five chapters, but there are really three that contain the bulk of its argumentative content: Chapters 2 and 3, which address the respective typologies of Race and Frei, and Chapter 4, which works to apply Frei's typology to the twentieth-century's ecumenical movement as a demonstration of its usefulness. As such, I will focus my attention on these parts of the book.

In essence, the demonstration of Chapter 2 is that, "for Race, Christian theology is primarily accountable to the academy and not to the church" (70). He shows how Race, in taking up Ernst Troeltsch's principles of criticism, analogy, and correlation, positions

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[1] An interesting example of the bleed through between these categories in antiquity exists in Caroline Schroeder's work on the theology of Shenoute of Atripe. See: (Schroeder 2007, particularly 131-139).

Christianity's relationship not just to other religions but also, and particularly, to secular concerns as one on which "the critical philosophy of history [is] the narrow gate through which all Christians must pass toward theological legitimacy" (33). Christian theology does not get to set its own terms or speak its own language, for it must be focused primarily on its place within a worldview on which "all beliefs or aspects of tradition (only in the religious realm apparently) that claim both historical uniqueness and universal meaning across time are myths" (22). As such, Collins suggests that Race's "typology is best viewed as a philosophical apology for the historically viewed rationality of religious faith in general as a universal aspect of human experience" (33). In fact, he goes so far as to suggest that "it is not even clear whether religious pluralism is Race's primary concern or if it is simply fodder for his defense of faith in general" (33). To shore up his "apologetic force" (33), Race also draws from John Hick's epistemology of religious experience.

Collins writes that "Hick's forays into pluralistic theology, like Race's, appear to have been largely a byproduct of a different and more basic objective – making the case for the philosophical legitimacy of religious faith" (34). Particularly important here is Hick's shifting the work of philosophical arguments for God from God's *existence* to our *experience* of God (34-35). "Hick's epistemological justification of religious experience preserves the critical force of Troeltsch's historical theory without abandoning a commitment to the possibility of authentic religious experiences, and to a limited degree, the awareness of religious truth that emerges from such experiences, occurring in history" (39). However, Collins avers that Hick's appeals to theology along the way are "largely window dressing" (38) and so, here again, we are drawn to consider the way in which Race's building his typology upon such foundations is indicative of a theology of religions which is not what it seems or claims to be upon further scrutiny.

The final nail Collins drives into this coffin is a reflection on Race's use of W.C. Smith's phenomenology of faith. In so doing, he summarizes Race's account of theological authority:

> Smith's theory of faith as an anthropological constant, empirically demonstrated through a phenomenological hermeneutic, is presented as a theological method that honors Troeltsch's historicism and Hick's epistemology while rebuffing the threat of relativism they would evince on their own. So it is in light of pluralism's apologetic appeal to philosophical authority that religious tenets derive their legitimacy… Having spurned tradition as a source of theological authority, Race follows Smith in replacing it with a vision of "critical thinking" in service of a phenomenologically attested vision of faith as an anthropological constant (61-62).

This passage is worth quoting at length because it works to summarize the general failure of Race's typology which Collins is honed in on. "Short of a definitive philosophical proof of the nonexistence of the divine, Race's pluralism posits that all theology need do is respond and reform to philosophical insights or criticisms as they arise… Theology, now philosophy's handmaiden, can no longer be philosophically undermined" (63). For Collins, this is a terribly threadbare way of viewing Christian theology which not only divorces it from its initially revelatory contexts in Scripture and the Church's traditions but also renders it incapable of achieving the very goal of a theology of religions: interreligious dialogue! After all, it simply presumes a very particular, post-Enlightenment way that theologies are supposed to function which is then transposed onto other faith traditions in quest of some universality binding them all together.

Nevertheless, Collins thinks that there are some basic commonalities between Race and Frei. "Most notably, both share a faith in God's presence to those outside the Christian faith and church and even agree that it is important that Christians seek to discern God's presence in the world" (73). The differences between the two become apparent, however, "in their contrasting views on the responsibilities of Christian theology and on the relationship between faith and philosophy" (74). Chapter 3 draws this point out across its breadth, but it can be particularly seen through Collins's sketching of Frei's three orders of Christian theology (110-112). These orders are summarized as follows (110):

> First-Order Theology (O1) – Christian witness, including the confessions of specific beliefs (for example, the creeds) that seem on the face of them to be talking about acknowledging a state of affairs that holds true whether one believes them or not.

> Second-Order Theology (O2) – The logic, or grammar, of the faith, which may well have bearing on the first-order statements, an endeavor to bring out the rules implicit in first-order statements.

> Third-Order Theology (O3) – A kind of quasi-philosophical or philosophical activity involved in this kind of theologizing, which consists of trying to tell others, perhaps outsiders, how these rules compare and contrast their kinds of ruled discourse.[2]

Collins tells us that "Frei designates this three-ordered approach to theology as 'critical or normed Christian self-description'" (111). This is a self-description which "seeks to identify the norms of Christian scripture as interpreted in the church and, alongside its own introspective analysis, pursues a better account of how such norms relate to those of other discourses" (111). And yet we might immediately spot something of an issue in the self-description in which O1-O3 are supposed to consist. Namely, there seems to be a presumption baked into what Frei offers that one can simply defer all manner of philosophical questions until one reaches O3.

Frei places an emphasis here on the so-called *sensus literalis* of Scripture. Collins describes this literality in Chapter 2 as the "plain" (78) or "surface" (78) understanding of the text but elaborates in Chapter 3 that the *sensus literalis* is, for Frei, "an interpretative consensus from the earliest days of the church and into present day, in which Christians of all stripes have agreed 'that the story of Jesus is about him, not about someone else or about nobody in particular or about all of us'" (115).[3] Collins clarifies that this consensus should not be understood to equate to "a single, legitimate reading" (115) or to "deny the legitimacy of the wide variety of readings to which the Gospels have been subjected" (115). Instead, "all that the consensus suggests is the legitimacy and priority of a reading grounded in Jesus' identity and of the centrality of this identity in enduring Christian communal structures and practices" (115). We might say this is fair enough, but this defining and caveating of Frei's *sensus literalis* spares it none of the difficulties posed by this idea that we can put off philosophical judgements until we are well into a given theological task.

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[2] Collins quotes directly from (Frei 1992, 20-21). All I have done is break the quote up and added the O1, O2, and O3 as designators so as to streamline further discussion of the orders.
[3] Collins here quotes from something but there is no footnote at the end of his quotation. It could perhaps come from either of the following citations which directly precede and follow this passage respectively, but I cannot be sure. See, potentially, (Frei 1992, 5) and (Frei 2015, 39).

This problem becomes clearer still when we get to Chapter 4's enumeration of Frei's typology in itself. Each type consists in a particular manner of understanding what theology is and does, the five types existing between two conceptual poles. In the case of the former pole, Christian theology "is an instance of a general class or generic type and is therefore to be subsumed under general criteria of intelligibility, coherence, and truth that it must share with other academic disciplines" (147).[4] In the case of the latter pole, theology "is an aspect of Christianity and is therefore partly or wholly defined by its relation to the cultural or semiotic system that constitutes that religion" (147).[5] Between the two sit Frei's five types, which are enumerated as follows:

> For type 1, theology is a philosophical discipline. For type 2, philosophy retains its guiding role for theology, wherein it affirms a direct correlation between the specifically Christian and "general cultural meaning structures such as natural science of the 'spirit' of a cultural era"[6] […] Type 3 similarly pursues this kind of correlation, but, significantly, does so without a "super theory or comprehensive structure for integrating them, only ad hoc procedures."[7] Type 4 reverses type 2's ordering, such that "the practical discipline of Christian self-description governs and limits the applicability of general criteria of meaning in theology."[8] Finally, for type 5, "Christian theology is exclusively a matter of Christian self-description because there really is no such thing in any grand manner in the first place" (147).[9]

At stake here, as with Race, is theological authority (148). However, Collins offers that this typology could, alternatively, be seen as conceptually parsing the difference between those who view the church as theology's audience and those who view the academy as that audience, those who view it as apologetic and those who view it as dogmatic, and those who think theology to be "correlated to philosophical discourse" (148) and those who think the two utterly separable.

To be fair, Collins does not think this account is without any issues, but the main problem he seems to point out is that Frei links this typology with particular theologians whereas he thinks it is more apt for describing theological movements or groups (151-152). He gives examples of entities which he thinks to be representative of the respective typologies (154-208) and his reapplication of the typology in this way is fairly persuasive. And yet, the issue of whether one – be they an individual or a group – can *actually* do theology sans philosophy in the way the typology appears to suggest remains. Returning to the orders of theology, it looks as though this account would suggest something like this: O1 could be undertaken under the auspices of type 1 and doing so would neglect the *sensus literalis* by subjecting discourse to outside frameworks. Now, consider Donald Fairbairn's recent contribution to this very journal on the topic of conciliar Christology.

Therein, Fairbairn (2022) surveys three different ways one might view the development of conciliar Christology across the early ecumenical councils: (i) as a series of pendulum swings between the Alexandrian and Antiochian Christological "schools" (Fairbairn 2022, 366-369),

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[4] Collins here quotes from: (Frei 1992, 2).

[5] See above.

[6] Collins here quotes from: (Frei 1992, 3).

[7] Here again Collins quotes from something without providing a footnote. However, the quotation likely comes from somewhere in the first five pages of *Types of Christian Theology* based on the surrounding notes.

[8] See above.

[9] Collins here quotes from: (Frei 1992, 5).

(ii) as a synthesis of emphases present in both "schools" (Ibid., 369-371), or (iii) as a program continuously normed by the thought of Cyril of Alexandria (Ibid., 371-373). Conciliar Christology is the sort of thing which should count as an example of O1, and yet it seems difficult to see how (i), (ii), and (iii) would not all be involved in the kind of philosophical theologizing which is supposedly reserved only for O3. Perhaps we could say that they are working at an O1 level but that they have done so in a type 1 or 2 sense in which philosophy has been inappropriately made a primary norm. But this would be an odd conclusion indeed given that per Collins and re Frei the creeds are supposed to be a kind of archetypal example of O1. That is to say, if it turns out that that the creeds themselves, regardless of how they are specifically interpreted, presuppose and contain a significant degree of philosophizing then that would appear to be a problem for the typology. Perhaps there is a way of construing the nature and work of philosophy which avoids this difficulty. But "philosophy" is never clearly defined or delimited in the book, so we are left to assume a relatively broad understanding of it must be applied.

On this point of clarity, and having already laid out the main difficulty Collins's contentions seem to face, it is worth highlighting a more general issue in this volume. Namely, some of its rhetorical force is lost in the way it presents itself. More specifically, Chapters 2 and 3 are exceedingly long and dense for what they aim to accomplish. The bulk of the former is consumed with reviews of Troelstch's historicism (17-33), Hick's epistemology (33-42), and Smith's phenomenology (42-64) in a way which makes it clear that this is a revision of Collins's PhD thesis (see Collins 2018).[10] The same is true of Chapter 3's laboring with Frei's primary sources inasmuch as a significant amount of what is covered seems ultimately unnecessary to its overall point. It likely would have made the book's argument run more smoothly as a whole if these chapters had been divided into two separate ones each (one mustering resources and another applying them) or if its literature review had simply been abridged. As it stands, too much time is spent showing one's work.

In sum, this book does an excellent job of drawing out often overlooked issues in Race's threefold typology. Collins's case is strong enough here that it may well leave readers who have become accustomed to it as a norm in theology of religions slightly scandalized that they could have been so drawn in by it! Those interested in contemporary readings of Frei will also likely find it an engaging dialogue partner. However, I find myself unconvinced that the fivefold typology is truly fit to the task of replacing what Race offers. To be sure, Collins looks to have unseated Race's work here, but the splitting of theology from philosophy which its proposed replacement seems to want is untenable in its current form. If there was some narrow definition for philosophy or its form(s)[11] of inquiry which was under discussion here then the results we see might be different. But if philosophy is meant as broadly as a Plantinga-style "thinking hard" (Plantinga 1975, 1) sense of the term, then the typology's path forward seems narrow indeed.

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[10] Do not take me here as saying there is anything wrong with revising and publishing a PhD thesis/dissertation! I mean nothing of the sort. Rather, I simply find it odd that this volume makes no mention of its being such a thing when it still bears some of the hallmarks of thesis/dissertation writing.

[11] For example, Hector (2011) argues against deploying metaphysics theologically, but he does not advance so bold a claim as one that says we can do theology with *no* philosophy whatsoever.

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