

Timothy C. Tennent  
*An Evangelical Theology of Religions*

**Abstract:**

This is a reprint of chapter seven of Dr. Tennent's book *Invitation to World Missions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications 2010) published with permission from Kregel Publications and Dr. Tennent. It provides an evangelical response to the issue of a theology of world religions, especially as a critique and corrective of the classical paradigm of exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism as initially developed by Alan Race and later refined by Paul Knitter. Tennent argues that the paradigm itself is problematic and needs to be nuanced to include a broader theological framework beyond issues of soteriology as well as a recognition of how the majority world church also interacts with other faiths.

**Keywords:** World Religions, exclusivism, inclusivism, pluralism, evangelicalism

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I recall with some fondness my introductory typing class in high school back in 1974. Little did I realize when I took the class how much of my life would be spent typing on a keyboard. The typewriters in those days were manual machines that required considerable effort and timing to master. Learning to type normally begins with the “home row” keys, which represent the most frequently used letters in typing. The least used keys are positioned in more remote locations. One of the least used characters, stuck way up at the top of the keyboard above your left hand, was the @ sign. It was used only in the rarest of circumstances, and many of us wondered how it managed to find its way onto the keyboard at all. However, with the advent of e-mail, it quickly went from being the most neglected, somewhat exotic, symbol on the keyboard to its current status as one of the most often used symbols on the board.

This is analogous to the development of the relationship between Christianity and non-Christian religions. Within the long history of Christendom, other religions were remote and out of reach. Religious diversity in the world is ancient, of course. However, the awareness of western Christians to other religions generally entered their consciousness only as exotic stories from distant lands. Suddenly, with the emergence of globalization, massive shifts in global immigration patterns, the rise of multiculturalism, the dramatic rise of Christianity in the heartlands of non-Christian faiths, and the events surrounding 9/11, the relationship between Christianity and other religions has become one of the most important issues dominating Christian discourse. Islamic mosques, Hindu temples, and Zen meditation centers are now found in nearly every major city in the western world. With the collapse of Christendom and the rise of relativistic pluralism, postmodernity, and cultural diversity, we are awash in a sea of competing and conflicting truth claims.

Tragically, many seminary and divinity school programs have been slow to respond to this new situation. It is quite astonishing that theological students in the west will spend countless hours learning about the writings of a few well-known, now deceased, German theologians whose global devotees are actually quite small and yet completely ignore over one billion living, breathing Muslims who represent one of the most formidable challenges to the Christian gospel today. Many seminaries and divinity schools still do not require the study of any other religion besides Christianity as a part of their core curriculum. The study of other religions or the development of a theology of religions generally appears only

as an elective course and, therefore, is still not considered essential for ministerial training in the twenty-first century.<sup>1</sup> Traditionally, such course work is directed either to those preparing for the mission field or for those interested in the academic study of religion. However, even a seminarian preparing to serve a pastorate in Kansas can no longer afford to ignore these issues. Indeed, it is increasingly evident that all who are interested in Christian leadership today must have a well-articulated, robust theology of religions as a normative part of their theological training.

The field of missiology has long understood the necessity of a theology of religions. However, I highlight this disconnect because it is important that theology become more missiological and missiology become more theological.<sup>2</sup> Today, missiology is serving as a major source of the global theological renewal, and missiology as a discipline is finally becoming more grounded in theology.<sup>3</sup> These are positive and welcome developments. The purpose of this chapter, therefore, is to explore the broad outlines of an evangelical theology of religions that is relevant to ministry throughout the global context.

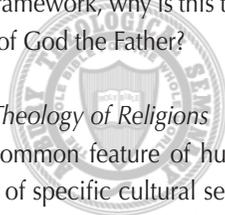
After discussing a few introductory matters, the chapter will fall into three major sections. First, the chapter will begin with an exploration of the four most widely held theologies of religion. Second, each of the four positions will be critiqued. Finally, the broad contours of an evangelical theology of religions will be proposed.

### **Preliminary Considerations**

There are two preliminary issues that must be explored at the outset of this study. First, what is the relationship between a theology of culture and a theology of religions? Second, within the context of a Trinitarian missiological framework, why is this theology of religions placed under the larger heading of God the Father?

#### *Theology of Culture and Theology of Religions*

Religion, as a common feature of human experience, does not *by necessity* exist outside of specific cultural settings. Among other things, religion involves ideas, symbols, feelings, values, and patterns of behavior. Therefore, religion, like all other expressions of human behavior, falls clearly within the parameters of how culture is defined and understood. So, from this vantage point, a theology of religions could be seen as a subset or particular consideration within a theology of culture. However, there



are two reasons I have dedicated a separate chapter to the formation of a theology of religions. First, Christianity claims that the basis of the Christian proclamation is a transcultural source. God the Father is the source of all revelation, whether found in creation, the sending of Jesus Christ into the world, or the biblical texts. A similar claim is made, for example, by Muslims, who claim that the Qur'an has its source in Allah, who transcends all the particularities of Arabic or any other culture. This raises important issues concerning how we understand transcultural revelation coming into particular cultural contexts and creates the need for a separate treatment. Second, a whole body of literature has arisen in the last thirty years from within the theological community proposing various theologies of religion. This is quite distinct from the largely anthropological literature, which, for the most part, has dominated our understanding of and analysis of human cultures. To properly respond to this, a separate treatment is required, even though the two themes are related to one another.

#### *Placement Within a Trinitarian Missiology*

Biblical revelation makes two central claims about God the Father that are particularly important in placing a theology of religions at this point. First, God the Father is the ultimate source of creation and therefore the sovereign Lord over all that exists. Yahweh is not regarded merely as Israel's sovereign but as the ultimate ruler over all creation and everything in it. For example, Jeremiah proclaims, "Ah, Sovereign Lord, you have made the heavens and the earth by your great power and outstretched arm. Nothing is too hard for you" (Jer. 32:17). Similarly, the psalmist pro-claims, "The earth is the LORD'S, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it" (Ps. 24:1). From a biblical perspective, there are no human cultures or societies that lay outside His sovereign rule. At its root Christianity is a declaration of the rule and reign of God. Everything within culture, including religions and their competing assertions affirming or denying God's existence, character, and work, must finally be accredited as true or exposed as false before the final tribunal of God the Father. Christianity as a religion is not above this verdict since all religions can either reflect the reign of God or join with larger cultural forces that stand in opposition to God's rule.

Second, God the Father is the source of all revelation. Revelation literally means an "unveiling" or "disclosure" of something previously hidden. In the Christian understanding, revelation comes as God's gift and is a freewill act of His self-disclosure. The Bible speaks of revelation not so

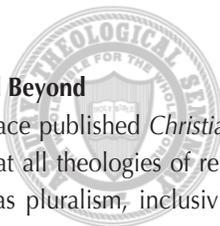
much in a theoretical sense- as a doctrine of epistemology explaining how we *know* things- but in a more practical sense. God reveals truths about Himself and about humanity so that we might know Him and His saving purposes- in short, so that we might capture a glimpse of the *missio dei*.

Revelation occurs in a wide array of forms in creation, in historical acts, in the Incarnation, and in the Bible. In order to better understand revelation, many theologians have made the distinction between general or natural revelation and special revelation. General revelation represents those features of God's self-disclosure that are *universally accessible*. The two most prominent examples of general revelation are the created order (Ps. 19:1) and human conscience (Rom. 2:14-15), since both are shared by all humanity. Special revelation represents God's self-disclosure to particular people at particular times regarding His saving purposes. Special revelation is not universally accessible. Examples of special revelation would include such divine disclosures as the Jewish law, the incarnation of Jesus Christ, and the Bible.

The relationship between general and special revelation is crucial to developing a theology of religions. There are many different views among theologians about the relationship between general revelation and special revelation. On one end of the spectrum are those who believe that special revelation is nothing more than specific and particularized symbolism of the general revelation that is universally known. At the other end of the spectrum are those who emphasize that true knowledge is found only in Christ and the scriptures and all other claims to knowledge are utterly false.<sup>4</sup> Later, we will explore my own view on this, but the point is that the centrality of revelation in the formulation of a theology of religions places the discussion within our larger understanding of God the Father as the source of all revelation.

### **The Classic Paradigm-And Beyond**

In 1982, Alan Race published *Christians and Religious Pluralism* in which he suggested that all theologies of religion operate within three basic paradigms known as pluralism, inclusivism, and exclusivism. This framework was later used and popularized by such well-known writers as the Roman Catholic Paul Knitter and the Protestant John Hick. Although the paradigm initially was used by pluralists, it quickly became used by writers across the theological spectrum, even if not all were happy with the precise language. Evangelicals emerged considerably later in the "theology of



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religions" discussion and have, in recent years, raised a number of concerns about the intent of the paradigm and, even more frequently, the adequacy of the language.<sup>5</sup>

In a more recent publication, Paul Knitter has changed the nomenclature for each of the positions, and he adds a fourth position along the spectrum.<sup>6</sup> He renames the exclusivist position the "replacement model," and the inclusivist position he calls the "fulfillment model." The most important difference for evangelicals is that Knitter has nuanced the "replacement" model by distinguishing between "total replacement," which he attributes primarily to fundamentalists, evangelicals, and Pentecostals, and "partial replacement," which he identifies with the new evangelicals, who, in his view, are more open to the idea of God's presence in other religions and hold a more robust view of general revelation. He cites, for example, Harold Netland, as an evangelical scholar who exemplifies the "partial replacement" model.<sup>7</sup> Knitter renames pluralism the "mutuality model" and identifies John Hick with this model. However, Knitter is surprisingly critical of Hick, citing the inherent relativism, the superficiality of analysis, and the reductionistic caricatures that result when one tries to discover common ground among the world's religions. Knitter suggests a fourth model, the "acceptance model," which draws primarily from postmodernism, George Lindbeck's post liberalism, and the idea of multiple salvations in the writings of Mark Heim.

Although I have tried to work within and modify the threefold paradigm, I think it is now necessary to acknowledge the growing influence of postmodern thought on these discussions. Therefore, we will move beyond the classic threefold paradigm and analyze four main views, as well as the long-needed distinctions within the evangelical view. For the sake of clarity, I will use in the headings both the traditional nomenclature and Knitter's more recent language. However, it should be acknowledged at the outset that these four paradigms do not represent precise positions but rather a wide variety of more nuanced views that fall along a broad spectrum.

#### *Exclusivism or the Replacement/Partial Replacement Model*

The more conservative theologies of religions are generally grouped together in a category known as exclusivism or particularism.<sup>8</sup> An exclusivistic position affirms three nonnegotiables. First, exclusivists affirm the unique authority of Jesus Christ as the apex of revelation and the norm by which all other beliefs must be critiqued. Exclusivists draw on texts such

as Acts 4:12 John 14:6 and 1 John 5:11-12 to show that Jesus is not just one of many lights in the religious cosmos; He is *the* light. Those who are without Christ are, to use the words of the apostle Paul, “without hope and without God in the world” (Eph. 2:12). Second, exclusivists affirm that the Christian faith is centered on the proclamation of the historical death and resurrection of Jesus Christ as the decisive event in human history (Acts 2:31-32). The scriptures declare that “God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ” (2 Cor. 5:19) and “making peace through his blood, shed on the cross” (Col. 1:20). Third, it is believed that salvation comes through repentance and faith in Christ’s work on the cross; thus, no one can be saved without an explicit act of repentance and faith based on the knowledge of Christ (John 3:16-18, 36; Mark 16:15-16).

The most well-known and uncompromising defense of the exclusivistic position was articulated by Hendrick Kraemer in his landmark book, *The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World*.<sup>9</sup> The book was written to stimulate discussion for the World Missionary Conference in Madras, India, in 1938. Kraemer’s work has become a classic exposition of the exclusivist position. He advocated what he called a “radical discontinuity” between the Christian faith and the beliefs of all other religions. Kraemer refused to divide revelation into the categories of general and special, which he thought might allow for the possibility of revelation outside the proclamation of the Christian gospel.<sup>10</sup> For Kraemer, the incarnation of Jesus Christ represents the “decisive moment in world history.”<sup>11</sup> Jesus Christ is the decisive revelation of God that confronts the entire human race and stands over and against all other attempts by other religions or philosophies to “apprehend the totality of existence.”<sup>12</sup> Kraemer’s attack on what he calls “omnipresent relativism” includes dismantling anything that would chip away at the vast gulf that exists between God and the human race. This involves the complete separation of nature and grace, or reason and revelation.

A more contemporary exposition of the exclusivist position may be found in Ron Nash’s *Is Jesus the Only Savior?*<sup>13</sup> Unlike Kraemer, Nash accepts the distinction between general and special revelation but argues that general revelation “performs the function of rendering man judicially accountable before God.”<sup>14</sup> Nash exposes overly optimistic views of the salvific power of general revelation but does not clearly demonstrate how general revelation might assist or prepare one to receive special revelation.

As Paul Knitter has recognized, there are clearly those within the exclusivistic perspective who are not convinced that maintaining the three nonnegotiables necessitates a position of such radical discontinuity or a completely negative assessment of other religions. These views tend to be more optimistic about the role and function of general revelation. While acknowledging that there is no salvation in Hinduism, Buddhism, or Islam, and that general revelation is incapable of saving anyone, some exclusivists nevertheless believe that God provides truths about Himself and humanity through general revelation that are accessible to all and that some of these truths have been incorporated into the beliefs of other religions, providing points of continuity whenever there is a consistency with the biblical revelation. This view has been advocated by Gerald McDermott in *Can Evangelicals Learn from World Religions?* and by Harold Netland in *Encountering Religious Pluralism*.<sup>15</sup> This perspective does not see Christian truth as completely detached from truths that may be found through general revelation but nevertheless holds that other religions ultimately fall short and cannot provide salvation because they do not accept the centrality of Christ's revelation and His work on the cross. Furthermore, exclusivists insist that the biblical message calls for an explicit act of repentance and faith in Christ that is obviously not part of the message or experience of non-Christian religions.<sup>16</sup>

Some who hold to the three nonnegotiables also have advocated a position known traditionally as fulfillment theology, which arose in the late nineteenth century, although the concept goes back as far as the second century with figures like Justin Martyr and his creative use of the *logos* concept. This use of the term *fulfillment* should not be confused with Knitter's more recent use of the term to describe inclusivism, which will be explored later. Unlike Kraemer, the governing purpose behind fulfillment theology is to demonstrate the continuity between human philosophies or religions and the supernatural religion of Christianity. While affirming the final revelation of Christ, fulfillment theologians saw God working through philosophy and non-Christian religions to prepare people to hear and respond to the gospel.

Fulfillment theology arose out of the nineteenth-century fascination with applying Darwinian ideas of evolution to science, sociology, religion, and ethics.<sup>17</sup> In the writings of Max Muller (1823-1900), the concept of fulfillment robbed Christianity of all claims to revelation, and the origins of religion were viewed as an expression of universal human experience.<sup>18</sup>

All religions were arranged in stages from the lower religions to the higher, monotheistic religions, culminating in Christianity.

However, there were scholars as well as missionaries who adopted the fulfillment concept within an evangelical framework. The best-known scholar to do this was Monier Monier-Williams (1819-1899) at Oxford. Monier-Williams argued for the supremacy of historical Christianity as divinely revealed. He was convinced that in time all the other religions of the world would crumble as they came into contact with the truth of the Christian gospel. However, he developed a far more positive attitude toward the world religions, arguing that Christianity would not be victorious because it *refuted* all religions but because it *fulfilled* them. He argued that all religions reveal universal, God-given instincts, desires, and aspirations that are met in the Christian gospel. The missionary community, particularly in India, where they were meeting stiff resistance from Hinduism, latched onto fulfillment ideas and began to explore them in earnest in the early years of the twentieth century.

The most notable and articulate expression of fulfillment thought came from missionaries working in India such as T. E. Slater (1840-1912), in his work *Higher Hinduism in Relation to Christianity*, and J. N. Farquhar (1861-1929), whose landmark book, *The Crown of Hinduism*, was published in 1913. Farquhar and Slater were two of the earliest scholars to produce major works that ambitiously set out to compare the doctrines of Hinduism with the doctrines in Christianity and demonstrate a fulfillment theme.<sup>19</sup> Farquhar sought to establish a nonconfrontational bridge for the Hindu to cross over to Christianity, arguing that all the notable features and aspirations within Hinduism find their highest expression and ultimate fulfillment in Christianity. He based the fulfillment theme on Christ's claim in Matthew 5:17 that He had not come to abolish or destroy but to fulfill.

The fulfillment motif among evangelicals was largely snuffed out with the publication of Kraemer's *The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World* in 1938, which reasserted a more rigid, uncompromising stance toward world religions. On the liberal side, the ongoing rise of rationalistic presuppositions further encouraged evangelicals to close ranks. However, the idea of a radical positive assessment of world religions without relinquishing the supremacy of Christianity found new expression in the second major attitude toward world religions, known as inclusivism.

### *Inclusivism or the New Fulfillment Model*

Inclusivism affirms the first two of the three “nonnegotiable” positions held by the exclusivists. Thus, inclusivists affirm without qualification that Jesus Christ is the definitive and authoritative revelation of God. Furthermore, they affirm the centrality of Christ’s work on the cross, without which no one can be saved. What makes the inclusivist position distinct from the exclusivists are their particular views regarding universal access to the gospel and the necessity of a personal knowledge of and response to Jesus Christ. The inclusivists argue from texts like John 3:16 and 2 Peter 3:9 that God’s universal love for the world and His desire to save everyone implies that everyone must have access to salvation. Stuart Hackett, an advocate of inclusivism, makes the case for this in *The Reconstruction of the Christian Revelation Claim*, where he states that if every human being has been objectively provided redemption in Jesus Christ through the Cross, then “it must be possible for every human individual to become personally eligible to receive that provision.”<sup>20</sup> In other words, universal provision demands universal access. Therefore, since the majority of people in the world do not have a viable access to the Christian message, the inclusivists believe that this access has been made available through general revelation, God’s providential workings in history, and even other religions. They affirm that Christ’s work on the cross is *ontologically* necessary for salvation but that it is not *epistemologically* necessary. In other words, you do not need to personally know about Christ to be the recipient of His work of grace on your behalf. Probably the best-known articulation of this view occurs in the Catholic Second Vatican Council document entitled *Constitution on the Church*, which declares,

Those also can attain to everlasting salvation who, through no fault of their own, do not know the Gospel of Christ or his Church, yet sincerely seek God and moved by grace, strive by their deeds to do His will as it is known to them through the dictates of conscience.<sup>21</sup>

Inclusivists generally point to examples of God working outside the covenant with Israel to show that faith, and even salvation, can be found among Gentiles. Biblical examples that are often cited include Melchizedek (Gen. 14), Rahab (Joshua 2), the Ninevites (Jonah 3), the Queen of Sheba (1 Kings 10), and Cornelius (Acts 10), among others.<sup>22</sup> Inclusivists also draw heavily from Paul’s statements that God “has not

left himself without testimony" (Acts 14:17) and that the Gentiles have "the requirements of the law written on their hearts" (Rom. 2:15). They interpret this witness as more than a *preparatio evangelica*- a preparation to receive and respond to the special revelation that follows. They see it as an independent salvific witness because Christ draws people to Himself not only explicitly through the Christian church, but also anonymously in countless hidden ways through creation, history, and the testimony of world religions. In short, salvific grace is mediated through general revelation, not just through special revelation.

The belief in universal access to the gospel and the expanded efficacy of general revelation has led inclusivists to make a distinction between a Christian and a believer. Both are saved through the completed work of Christ on the cross. However, the Christian has explicit knowledge of this, whereas the believer has only experienced Christ implicitly and does not even realize that he or she has been saved by Christ. The best-known proponent of inclusivism was the Roman Catholic theologian Karl Rahner, who called these implicit believers "anonymous Christians." Rahner taught that even though the non-Christian religions contain errors, God uses them as channels to mediate His grace and mercy and ultimately to apply the work of Christ.<sup>23</sup> The basis for the explicit-implicit or ontological-epistemological distinction is linked to the Jews themselves. Rahner argues that the believing Jews of the Old Testament were reconciled to God through Christ, even though they could not possibly have known about Christ explicitly. Paul, for example, argues that Christ accompanied the Israelites during their wilderness wanderings (1 Cor. 10:4), even though they could not have been explicitly aware of it. By extension this is applied to peoples around the world, who, although they are living chronologically after Christ, are epistemologically living as if Christ had not yet come. It is these people, in particular, for whom the inclusivists want to hold out hope. Several leading Protestants have followed the new openness exhibited by Vatican II and with some qualifications have fully endorsed inclusivism. Two of the more prominent Protestants who advocate inclusivism are John Sanders, in *No Other Name*, and Clark Pinnock, in *A Wideness in God's Mercy*.

#### *Pluralism or Mutuality Model*

Pluralism rejects all three of the nonnegotiables held by exclusivists. Pluralists such as Paul Knitter, William Cantwell Smith, W. E. Hocking, and John Hick believe that the world's religions provide

independent access to salvation. Conflicting truth claims are reconciled through relocating them from the level of objective, normative truth to subjective experience. John Hick, in *An Interpretation of Religion*, writes that world religions merely “embody different perceptions and conceptions of, and correspondingly different responses to, the Real from within the major variant ways of being human.” He goes on to say that world religions all provide what he calls “soteriological spaces,” or “ways along which men and women find salvation/liberation/ultimate fulfillment.”<sup>24</sup> Christianity, then, is just one among many religions and has no unique claim as the final or authoritative truth. According to the pluralists, Christianity is not necessarily the most advanced religion, and it is not the fulfillment of other religions. In short, all claims to exclusivity have been surrendered through a process of radical relativization.

Pluralist Gordon Kaufman states candidly that exclusivistic views lead to idolatry and render it nearly impossible to take other faiths seriously.<sup>25</sup> Instead, he says, “We must find ways of relativizing and opening up our basic symbol system.”<sup>26</sup> John Hick agrees, calling the claim of Christian exclusivity a “myth” that must be radically reconstructed into a statement of personal meaning, not historical fact. They argue that Christocentric views of Christians should be abandoned for a more globally oriented theocentric view that allows all religions to participate as equal players.<sup>27</sup>

Unlike exclusivists and inclusivists, pluralists do not accept the necessity of demonstrating biblical support for their view because that would cede to Christianity some kind of adjudicating role over other religions. The New Testament may be authoritative for Christians, but the Qur’an holds its own independent authority for Muslims, the Vedas for Hindus, and so forth. For the pluralists, the only universal standard of criteria rests in human experience, not in any particular sacred texts. This is in marked contrast to Kraemer and many of his followers, who tended to downplay general revelation altogether. Pluralists go to the opposite extreme and either deny special revelation outright or seriously degrade it to a kind of general revelation through universal religious consciousness.

#### *Postmodern or Acceptance Model*

As noted above, this fourth view traditionally has not appeared in the classic threefold paradigm of exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism. The acceptance model affirms the postmodern assertion that there are no universal truths and that it is arrogant to assert that such truths may

exist. This view also, quite refreshingly, acknowledges that world religions really *are* fundamentally different from one another and we should quit trying to talk as if they were, on some deeper level, really all the same. According to George Lindbeck, each religion offers a total, comprehensive framework for understanding its view of reality, and any attempt to compare or find common ground is reductionistic.<sup>28</sup> In short, this model affirms the incommensurability of all religions.

Paul Knitter borrows Robert Frost's famous line, "good fences make good neighbors," as a metaphor for understanding the acceptance approach. Knitter says, "religions are to be good neighbors to each other. Each religion has its own backyard. There is no 'commons' that all of them share. To be good neighbors, then, let each religion tend to its own backyard, keeping it clean and neat." When we talk with our "neighbors," we should do so over the back fence, "without trying to step into the other's yard in order to find what they might have in common."<sup>29</sup> The dialogue that plays such a central role in the pluralist/acceptance model is reduced to only "swapping stories" without searching for any commonly shared or universal truths. For Lindbeck, to say that "all religions recommend something which can be called 'love' ... is a banality as uninteresting as the fact that all languages are spoken."<sup>30</sup>

Mark Heim, in *Salvations: Truth and Difference in Religions*,<sup>31</sup> takes the acceptance model to its logical conclusion. Heim argues that the postmodern perspective of the acceptance model means that we may really have multiple goals, multiple salvations, and multiple deities to which the various religions are related. Heim seeks to argue this point within the classic doctrine of the Trinity. Since Christians already affirm plurality in God, argues Heim, perhaps the plurality of religions can fit into the variety of relations that are in God, allowing for what he calls "permanently co-existing truths" and "parallel perfections."<sup>32</sup> Through the acceptance model, each practitioner can affirm the particularity and exclusivity of his or her own faith, for God does not reveal Himself generically but in the diversity of religious particularity. The classic pluralist metaphor of many paths up one mountain has been replaced in the acceptance model with many paths up many different mountains. Jesus, Buddha, Shiva, and Allah are all universal saviors, since none of them represents an exhaustive or exclusive revelation, but all reflect the infinite diversity of the Divine.

## Evaluation of the Four Positions

Our evaluation will begin with a critique of the four positions as currently outlined and then explore some of the problems with the larger paradigm through which these positions are articulated.

### *Postmodern or Acceptance Model Evaluated*

The acceptance model, on the surface, seems to come full circle back to the exclusivist position since it provides a way for Christians to reclaim the language of exclusivism and particularity. However, a closer examination reveals that although the language of particularity has been reclaimed, this masks several major deficiencies that are inherent in the acceptance model. First, *the model rejects objective revelation as the basis for truth by redefining truth as socially constructed narratives*. For example, this model simultaneously affirms the exclusive claims of Christianity and Islam and discourages us from contemplating that one set of claims may be right and the other wrong. Thus, they must *both* be right. However, a closer examination reveals that this claim is possible only through a radical redefinition of truth. For example, a central claim of Christianity is that God became incarnate in Jesus Christ (John 1:14). In Islam, such a claim is considered blasphemous, and to affirm it is to commit *shirk* (Surah 17:111; 19:35), the unforgivable sin (*kabirah*). Now, from the perspective of objective truth, either God did become incarnate in Jesus Christ, or He did not. The postmodern answer is to recast truth as a socially constructed metaphor. The word *truth* refers only to a rhetorical, imagined construct and cannot be applied to revelation as in the Christian use of the word. This is why this model cannot even explore the possibility of certain shared truths among religions. There is no shared truth to be known; all we have are individually constructed narratives, shared stories that float autonomously in the sea of religious discourse.

Second, *this model has a very weak view of history*. Some philosophies and religions do not necessitate a robust view of history. For example, a famous Zen Buddhist saying is, "If you should meet the Buddha on the road, you should kill him." The point of this rather shocking statement is that the historicity of the Buddha is not important. What matters is the teaching, or *dharmā*, which he gave to the world. In contrast, Christianity (like Islam and Judaism) is constructed on specific historical events that are nonrepeatable and, therefore, unique. For example, Christians assert that the resurrection of Jesus Christ is an event that took place in real history.

If Christ were not historically raised, then all the fervent devotion, earnest faith, and worship attributed to Jesus are instantly rendered vain and futile. This is why Paul declares, “If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins” (1 Cor. 15:17). However, the acceptance model is based on a postmodern skepticism regarding history. The actual historicity of the Incarnation or the Resurrection is regarded suspiciously as either unknown or unknowable.

One of the classic problems with postmodernism is that it creates worlds where everything is possible but nothing is certain. History, for the postmodern, is constantly mutable because it never rises above the watermark of an endless series of conjectures and biases. Therefore, the unique claims of religions are all allowed to coexist because none of them can either be denied or verified by history. George Lindbeck acknowledges the difficulty that this postmodern proposal poses for a Christian view of history. He says that it may be some time before Christians can accept his model because Christianity is “in the awkwardly intermediate stage of having once been culturally established but not yet clearly disestablished.”<sup>33</sup> He means that Christianity has not yet been separated from history.

However, Christianity cannot be separated from history without ceasing to be Christianity. The apostolic faith is not only rooted in history, but it also proclaims a historical *telos*, an eschatological goal, to which all of history is moving. The eschaton is not *beyond* history but rather is the full manifestation of a new history that already has broken into the present.

Finally, *the antifoundationalist stance inherent in this model leads to an unbridled relativism*. With the twin collapse of truth and history, it becomes impossible to discover any basis for evaluating or adjudicating the various claims of the world’s religions. How is someone to decide whether to be a Muslim, a Christian, a Satanist, or nothing at all? Even Lindbeck concedes that the choice is “purely irrational, a matter of arbitrary whim or blind faith.”<sup>34</sup> He acknowledges the need to discover what he calls “universal norms of reasonableness,” but he candidly admits that it is unlikely that any such norms can find mutual agreement among the plurality of faiths. The very fact that the advocates of the acceptance model are looking for such norms reveals that the ghost of the Enlightenment or, perhaps, latent Christendom, keeps them from believing their own message. The moment the “universal norms of reasonableness” are found, it would, by definition, mark the end of the acceptance model. It is a philosophical solvent that dissolves itself. Pluralists may accept multiple

paths, but they at least still envision a *single* mountain and acknowledge that some religious movements exhibit qualities that are moving people *down* the mountain rather than up. For pluralists *many* religions does not necessarily mean *any* religion. However, the postmodernism of the acceptance model envisions, by its own account, an endless range of mountains, each independent of the other. We are left only with a radical form of relativism among multiple islands of religious autonomy.

### *Pluralism or Mutuality Model Evaluated*

The pluralist position has numerous difficulties. First, *pluralism does not take seriously the actual claims and practices of those who practice the religions that are being considered*. Devout Muslims and Christians, for example, despite their differences, are equally disturbed by pluralism's attempt to relativize the particularities of their variant claims. Quite paternalistically, the pluralists claim to *see beyond* the actual beliefs and practices of religions to some deeper perspective that they have. According to the pluralists, those who actually follow these religions are largely unaware that the transcendent claims they have are actually only human projections and perceptions of their own humanity. However, what assurance do we have that the pluralists have found an Archimedean point from which they see all the other religions? Is not pluralism itself a particular stance, drawn from Enlightenment, Kantian philosophy?

Second, *the "God" of the pluralists is so vague that it cannot be known and is, in fact, unknowable*. The pluralist John Hick has forcefully called Christians to abandon a Christocentric view of reality. However, in its place he posits a theocentric center that is so vague that he cannot even use the word *God* to describe ultimate reality lest he offend non-theistic religions like Buddhism and Taoism, which his position insists that he regard with equality. The result is that Hick's "Real" (as he prefers to call the ultimate reality) is broad enough to encompass both the strict theism of Judaism and Islam and the atheism of Buddhism and Taoism. Hick's "Real" encompasses both the personal conception of God in Jesus Christ and the impersonal conception of God in the *nirguna* Brahman of Hinduism. The resultant fog gives us both a "God" and a "no-God" who is unknown and unknowable and about whom we can make no definitive statement because "the Real as it is in itself is never the direct object of religious experience. Rather, it is experienced by finite humankind in one of any number of historically and culturally conditioned manifestations."<sup>35</sup>

Third, *the pluralist position ultimately is based on the subjectivity of human experience, not on any objective truth claims.* Human experience is the final arbiter of all truth. Therefore, revelation as revelation is struck down. The deity of Christ, for example, is not an objective truth that calls for our response; rather, it is merely a subjective expression of what Jesus meant to His disciples, which may or may not affect or influence us because every human conceives of truth differently. For example, early in his writings Hick sought to define salvation vaguely as the “transformation from self-centeredness to Reality centeredness.”<sup>36</sup> However, this definition of salvation came under the withering fire of feminist theologians, who argued that defining the lack of salvation as being self-focused and self-assertive is a characteristically male assessment. Females, they argue, find salvation by being more assertive and self-projecting. Hick conceded that female salvation may indeed be the opposite of male salvation.<sup>37</sup> This kind of unbridled subjectivity, which seeks to replace biblical theology based on the assurance of divine revelation with the ever-changing subjectivity of human experience, is, in my view, untenable. For the pluralist, religion is no longer about truth as truth but about filling a market niche. The question of truth is bracketed off by the pluralists. As George Sumner has observed, “The turban, the prayer wheel, and the mantra have all been rendered ‘consumer preferences.’”<sup>38</sup>

Indeed, Clark Pinnock has gone so far as to say that the very term *pluralist* is an inaccurate label for this position. He points out that “a true pluralist would accept the differences of the various world religions and not try to fit them into a common essence. It would be better to call them relativists.”<sup>39</sup>

### *Inclusivism or the New Fulfillment Model Evaluated*

The inclusivist position is to be commended for its strong affirmation of the centrality of Jesus Christ and the indispensable nature of His death and resurrection for salvation. Furthermore, inclusivism has keenly discerned how God has worked in the lives of those outside the boundaries of the covenant, such as Rahab and Naaman, along with many others. The more positive view of the relationship between general and special revelation is a welcome relief from the complete separation of nature and grace as seen in Kraemer. On this particular point, the inclusivists do not necessarily fall outside the parameters of Christian history and tradition. Indeed, Thomas Aquinas advocated a more open attitude toward general revelation with the dictum, *Gratia non tollit sed perficit naturam*,

that is, grace does not abrogate but perfects nature. However, inclusivists have embraced additional views that are clearly at variance with historic Christian faith.

First, the inclusivist's attempt to drive a wedge between the ontological necessity of Christ's work and the epistemological response of repentance and faith cannot be sustained. Inclusivists can be very selective in their use of the biblical data. For example, they often quote the passage in 2 Peter 3:9 that says that God is "not wanting anyone to perish" but fail to quote the rest of the verse, which says God wants "everyone to come to repentance." God's universal salvific will is explicitly linked to human response. Inclusivists cite Paul's powerful statement about the universality of revelation in Romans 10:18, which says that the "voice" of revelation has "gone out into all the earth," but they fail to point out that this affirmation is in the context of Paul's declaration that "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved" (Rom. 10:13). Paul goes on to establish a chain that begins with the sending church and the preaching witness, leading to the one who hears, believes, and calls upon the name of the Lord (Rom. 10:14-15). The inclusivists want to separate the links of this chain and argue that the witnessing church is not necessary for believing, that is, implicit saving faith can be present apart from the explicit knowledge of Jesus Christ. However, if the inclusivist position were true, then it would diminish the importance of Christ's commission since it would mean that the non-Christian religions have brought more people to the feet of Christ (implicitly) than the witnessing church in the world.

Second, *for the inclusivists to argue that the object of all genuine faith is implicitly Christ shifts the emphasis from a personal response to Christ to the experience of faith regardless of the object of faith.* In this view, salvation comes equally to the Hindu who has faith in Krishna, or the Buddhist who has faith in the eighteenth vow of Amitaba Buddha, or the Christian who has faith in Jesus Christ. Moving from the worship of Krishna to the worship of Christ does not involve a turning away from Krishna but merely a clarification that they were, indeed, worshipping Christ all along. As Paul Knitter says about inclusivism, "The purpose of the church is not to rescue people and put them on totally new roads, rather it is to burn away the fog and enable people to see more clearly and move more securely."<sup>40</sup>

However, in Acts 20:21 Paul says, "I have declared to both Jews and Greeks that they must turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus." What would the inclusivists have recommended to Wynfrith

when he confronted the Frisian religion in A.D. 754? Would they have counseled Wynfrith to point out that the human sacrifices offered to Njord, the god of the earth, were actually only symbols or types of the Lamb of God? Was Thor really just another name for Jesus Christ?<sup>41</sup> This is not to deny that there are examples in the Old Testament of people who have faith outside the Jewish covenant, such as Jethro, Naaman, and Rahab; but the object of their faith is explicitly the God of Israel, not the indigenous gods they formerly worshipped. Paul's famous speech in Acts 17 should not be taken as the construction of a salvific natural theology but rather as Paul "picking up the inchoate longings of this exceptionally religious people and directing them to their proper object."<sup>42</sup>

Third, *the inclusivist position unduly separates soteriology from ecclesiology*. Inclusivism claims to be a "wider hope" answer to the question "Who can be saved?" However, the inclusivistic answer focuses on the earnest seeker quite apart from the church as the redemptive community that lives out, in community, the realities of the New Creation in the present. Only through dramatic theological reductionism can one equate biblical salvation in the New Testament to the individual destiny of a single seeker after God. Karl Rahner responded to this charge by arguing that the church and the sacraments become mysteriously embodied in the communities that gather at the temple or the mosque. Thus, Rahner does not just offer us anonymous *Christians*; he offers us anonymous communities, anonymous scriptures, and anonymous sacraments. Rahner's solution may help to reunite soteriology with ecclesiology but only by robbing ecclesiology of any meaning, since, in the final analysis, Rahner cannot make a distinction between a Hindu or Islamic community and a Christian one.

Finally, *to call Hindus or Muslims or Buddhists "anonymous Christians" has long been regarded as an insult to those within these traditions*. It is a latent form of triumphalism to claim that you as an outsider have a better and deeper understanding of someone else's religious experience that trumps their own understanding of their actions and beliefs. It is patronizing to tell a devout Hindu who worships Krishna that he or she is really worshipping Christ but is temporarily in an epistemological gap. Could not the Buddhist or the Hindu respond that we as Christians are actually "anonymous Buddhists" or "anonymous Hindus"? Indeed, there are Buddhist and Muslim groups who have made that very claim.<sup>43</sup>

*Exclusivism or the Replacement/Partial Replacement Models Evaluated*

The strength of the exclusivist position is that it affirms the authority of scripture, the unique centrality of Jesus Christ, and the indispensability of His death and resurrection. Furthermore, exclusivism takes seriously the call to repentance and the need to turn to Jesus Christ as the object of explicit faith. Exclusivism affirms the key tenets of the historic Christian proclamation as delivered to us in the ancient creedal formulations. The problem with exclusivism comes when, in a desire to protect the centrality of these truths, it overextends itself into several potential errors.

First, *in a desire to affirm the centrality of special revelation and the particular claims of Christ, exclusivism can fail to fully appreciate God's activity in the pre-Christian heart.* It is one thing to affirm that Jesus Christ is the apex of God's self-revelation; it is entirely another to say that Jesus Christ is the *only* revelation from God. Since all general revelation ultimately points to Christ, exclusivists need not be threatened by these pointers and signs God has placed in creation and in the human conscience that testify to Him. God is not passive or stingy in His self-revelation, but He has left "footprints" behind, whether in the awe-inspiring expanse of the universe, or in the recesses of a solitary heart groping after God, or in the depths of the reflective human mind as one explores many of the fundamental questions that have gripped philosophers and theologians throughout the ages. In this respect, the modified exclusivistic view that Knitter identifies as partial replacement is far better.

Second, *exclusivists sometimes have taken a defensive posture and been unwilling to honestly engage with the questions and objections of those from other religions.* The early Christians boldly proclaimed the gospel in a context of a dizzying array of cults, mystery religions, emperor worship, and more. The apostles surely would have found the defensiveness that often has characterized exclusivists as incomprehensible in light of our global mandate. Put simply, the match cannot be engaged if the players remain in the safety of the locker room. The creeds of historic Christianity are not bunkers behind which we hide; they are the basis for a global proclamation.

Third, *exclusivists have often unnecessarily bracketed off non-Christian religions and their sacred texts from the rest of culture.* This has inadvertently created a separation not only between general and special revelation but also between the doctrines of creation and soteriology. The result is what Enlightenment thinker Gotthold Lessing (1729-1781) has

called the “ugly ditch” that separates the particularities of special revelation and history from the universal knowledge of God rooted in creation and human conscience. However, as I have demonstrated in an earlier publication, numerous truths from both general and special revelation have become incorporated into the actual texts and worldviews of other religions.<sup>44</sup>

## **The Classic and Expanded Paradigm Revisited and Evaluated**

### *Structural Problems*

There are three major structural problems with the classic paradigm that are not sufficiently alleviated by Knitter’s new nomenclature.

First, the positions within the paradigms have been primarily articulated within a *soteriological* framework. In other words, the various positions tend to be the answers to the questions “Who can be saved?” and “What is the fate of the unevangelized?” Even though these are important questions, if they are asked in isolation, they become theologically reductionistic by separating the doctrine of salvation from the larger creational and eschatological framework from which the doctrine of salvation emerges in the Bible. Second, the positions within the paradigms have been understood as either validating or negating *particular religious traditions*. Exclusivists and inclusivists believe in the final supremacy of the Christian *religion*, whereas the pluralists and the postmodernists see the religions of the world on a more level playing field. This perspective is particularly evident in Paul Knitter’s description of evangelicals within the total or partial replacement model (exclusivism). Knitter says that the replacement model is calling for a “kind of holy competition between the many religions... Such competition is as natural, necessary, and helpful as it is in the business world. You’re not going to sell your product effectively if you present it as ‘just as good’ as the next guy’s... So let the religions compete!”<sup>45</sup> However, the evangelical view is not to posit that Christianity as a *religion* is superior to all other religions. Rather, evangelicals assert that Jesus Christ is the apex of God’s revelation. At times the Christian church has been faithful in proclaiming the good news of Jesus Christ. However, like any other religion, Christianity at times has been co-opted by cultural forces and become an expression of human rebellion like any other religion. It was Leslie Newbigin who reminded us, based on Romans 3:2-3, that “it was the guardians of God’s revelation who crucified the Son of God.”<sup>46</sup>

Third, the traditional paradigm *emerges out of the Enlightenment project and completely ignores the majority world church, which has a very different understanding and experience with religious pluralism.* The Enlightenment ushered in a skepticism regarding religious truth that continues to the present. The German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) famously defined the Enlightenment as “the emergence of man from his self-incurred immaturity.”<sup>47</sup> Kant attempted to construct a universal rational morality that would give rise to a natural religion. He rejected any claims of particularity based on special revelation, thereby opening the doors to a radical kind of relativism regarding religion. Religion was seen as nothing more than a myriad of legitimate alternatives for explaining and interpreting the underlying natural religion that was part of the universal human experience. Rather than the mind being seen as the mirror that reflected the objective world, Kant introduced the subjective nature of all knowledge; so-called “reality” was nothing more than a construct of the mind. David Wells observes that it was Kant who initiated the breakdown “of the old distinction between subject and object.”<sup>48</sup>

The Enlightenment perspective can be seen in the French philosopher Rene Descartes (1596-1650). Descartes believed that the only source of knowledge was logical deduction. His famous dictum, *cogito ergo sum* (“I think, therefore, I am”), demonstrates that knowledge for Decartes begins with a person as a thinking, doubting agent, not as the recipient of divine self-disclosure revealed in the Bible. As the Enlightenment progressed, the traditional Christian assertion of objectively received truth revealed propositionally and reliably in the Bible could no longer be countenanced.

This is to be contrasted with the rise of the majority world church, which is taking place in the midst of religious pluralism as a descriptive fact. George Sumner is correct in observing that religious pluralism in the west has become the “presenting symptom for a wider epistemological illness in western Christianity.”<sup>49</sup> In contrast, religious pluralism in the majority world is closer to the context of the first century. Global Christianity, as a rule, is more theologically conservative, less individualistic, and has far more experience interacting with the actual devoted practitioners of major world religions than most western scholars. Having worked in Asia for twenty years, I have observed that, for the most part, despite living in a context of religious pluralism, majority

world Christians do not view religions as “comparable religious artifacts” but rather as an actual stimulus to the proclamation of Jesus Christ.<sup>50</sup>

### *Amos Yong’s Pneumatological Approach*

An alternative approach to the classic paradigm from a conservative perspective has been proposed by Pentecostal theologian Amos Yong from Regent University. Yong, in his books *Discerning the Spirit(s)*, *Beyond the Impasse*, and *Hospitality and the Other*, has proposed an approach that can be understood broadly as a pneumatological theology of religions. Yong begins by observing that the way pluralists have framed a theology of religions as a subset of a generic doctrine of God is overly optimistic. Likewise, framing a theology of religions as a subset of the doctrine of soteriology is unnecessarily pessimistic. Furthermore, Yong argues that any theology of religions that is framed by Christological categories may position us quite well *defensively* to mute the claims of other religions, but it is less effective in a more *offensive* engagement that acknowledges that the particularity of the “Word made flesh” (John 1:14) must be balanced by the universality of the “Spirit poured-out-on-all flesh” (Acts 2:17). Instead, Yong proposes a theology of religions framed around pneumatology. Yong is convinced that neglect of the doctrine of the Spirit in western theology has led to an overly negative perception of the Spirit’s work in non-Christian faiths. In contrast, Yong invokes Irenaeus’s metaphorical reference to the Son and the Spirit as the “two hands of the Father.”<sup>51</sup> Yong explores how we might discern how the “hand” of the Spirit may have extended God’s presence and activity in non-Christian religions.

Yong proposes a threefold criteria (divine presence, divine absence, and divine activity) that can enable the church to discern God’s presence and work or reject the demonic or destructive. In his more recent writings, Yong emphasizes that the Spirit enables Christians to embody the “hospitality of God” by helping us to interact positively as hosts in a religiously plural world. Recalling the multiplicity of tongues on the day of Pentecost, Yong reminds us that even if the religious “other” speaks in a religiously foreign tongue, the Spirit may enable us to understand and discern His presence and work within the other religions.

The strength of Yong’s proposal is that his pneumatological approach places the discussion within a much larger theological framework. The Spirit’s work in creation allows Yong to embrace a more robust view of general revelation. He cites examples from patristic writers such as

Irenaeus, Clement, and Justin Martyr to demonstrate that the early church fathers framed their theology of religions within a much larger framework than the classic paradigm. Yong's pneumatological approach also allows him to ask bigger questions in seeking to discern God's work in human culture, including the religious narratives of people who are created in the image of God.

Despite these positive developments, Yong's proposal has three main weaknesses. First, it is not sufficiently Christocentric. Yong's original intention was to propose a more thoroughgoing Trinitarian theology of religions that uses pneumatology as a *starting point*. Yong points out that "any Christian theology of religions that begins pneumatologically must ultimately include and confront the Christological moment."<sup>52</sup> At the start of his proposal, he agrees to "bracket, at least temporarily, the soteriological question."<sup>53</sup> However, as his project develops, it seems that he never fully returns to the centrality of Christology and soteriology. In fact, Yong speaks of Christology imposing "categorical constraints" on his theology of religions.<sup>54</sup> While Yong surely assumes Christology, he is not explicit enough to protect his theology from subjectivism. In the end, Yong's thesis stands or falls on the development of a trustworthy set of criteria that can empower the church to discern the presence of the Holy Spirit from the presence of demonic and destructive spirits, which may be present in the life and thought of the adherents of non-Christian faiths. Unfortunately, his three-fold criteria are too ambiguous to provide the assurance that such an ambitious project demands. Even Yong concedes that "discerning the spirits will always be inherently ambiguous."<sup>55</sup> Yong also concedes, rightly, that no religious activity can be so neatly categorized as divine, human, or demonic.<sup>56</sup>

Second, his proposal still does not provide a way to move beyond a dialogue between reified religious traditions and structures. As will be demonstrated later, an evangelical theology of religions must demonstrate that the tension is between Christ and all religions. It cannot be a proposal that, despite all its generosity, inevitably exudes the presumptuous sense that evangelicals believe in the superiority of the Christian *religion*.

Third, Yong's proposal, like the classic paradigm, does not sufficiently take into account the very different ways religious pluralism is understood and experienced within the global church. Yong remains determined to find a new theology of religions that will enable evangelicals to have a voice within the larger Enlightenment project. However, in light of

the dramatic shift in the center of Christian gravity, it is no longer sufficient to only address such a narrow western audience.

### **An Evangelical Theology of Religions**

The proposal I am setting forth begins by reviewing five standards or benchmarks that any evangelical theology of religions must meet. After the standards have been explored, I will demonstrate one example of how an evangelical theology of religions might be constructed in a way that is consistent with these five standards.

#### *Five Standards in the Formulation of an Evangelical Theology of Religions*

##### Being Attentive to our Nomenclature

First, labels or nomenclature for various positions must be understood both descriptively and performatively. This means that any descriptive words or phrases used to describe a position should be accurate and acceptable to those who adhere to the position being named. Unfortunately, positions within interreligious dialogue often have been caricatured. An honest engagement with the actual positions is needed. Furthermore, the positions should not just describe what we believe in some static way but should also reflect our actions and our lives in relationship to those who belong to non-Christian religions. In other words, a theology of religions must have an ethical and relational orientation, not merely a descriptive and doctrinal one.

##### Maintaining a Trinitarian Frame with Christological Focus

Second, a theology of religions must be part of a larger Trinitarian theology. There have been quite a few scholars who have proposed their theology of religions within a Trinitarian framework, but it is important that it also be Christocentric. In the final analysis, Christology provides the only truly objective basis for evaluating truth claims, whether those claims emerge from within Christianity (intrareligious dialogue) or in response to normative claims from other religions (interreligious dialogue).

##### Proclaiming Biblical Truth

Third, an evangelical theology of religions must proclaim biblical truth. In recent years, increasing numbers of evangelicals have lost confidence in the exclusivity of the gospel message. Indeed, the very word *exclusivism* is avoided because of various negative associations with the

word. Furthermore, we have become increasingly accommodating to the relativistic mood of the culture. Although, as this proposal will reveal, I do not suggest retaining the word *exclusivism*. My choice is not motivated by an attempt to lessen the “scandal of particularity” but to create a nomenclature that is more appropriate without sanding down the rough edges of the gospel message.

We must recognize that we are now proclaiming the gospel within a context where relativity is not merely a theoretical proposal but a moral postulate. One of the most amazing casualties in the contemporary emergence of interreligious dialogue is the absence of the word *truth*, as articulated within a biblical understanding of revelation. Today, the tension is increasingly not between truth and falsehood but between tolerance and intolerance. As explored in chapter 1, evangelicals have not negotiated the transition from the center of cultural life to the margins very well. Therefore, while being fully engaged in global realities, we need to reclaim the language of truth, even if from a position of exile.

#### Placing the Discussion Within a Larger Theological Setting

Fourth, an evangelical theology of religions must be placed within a larger biblical and theological context. This should not be understood to downplay the importance of the three nonnegotiables (uniqueness of Jesus Christ, centrality of His death and resurrection, and the need for an explicit response of repentance and faith) affirmed in the traditional exclusivistic position. However, these nonnegotiables must be articulated within the larger context of the doctrines of creation, revelation (general and special), anthropology, the Trinity, Christology, pneumatology, ecclesiology, and, importantly, eschatology. This also will keep our theology of religions from being either too individualistic or theologically reductionistic.

#### Recognizing the Global Dimension of Religious Pluralism and World Christianity

Fifth, an evangelical theology of religions must be articulated within the context of different understandings and perceptions of religious pluralism that are present in the world today. In the west, globalization, immigration, and the collapse of Christendom have given rise to a particular form of modern, religious pluralism that is decidedly relativistic. Religious pluralism is not merely a descriptive fact of our world; it is a “conflict of normative interests.”<sup>57</sup> Religious pluralism in the west is generally committed

to making all religious discussions a subset of anthropology, which is consistent with the Enlightenment project. While the postmodern paradigm rejects the Enlightenment's reliance upon reason and the notion of inevitable progress, it just as emphatically rejects the notion of revelation. However, in the majority world, religious pluralism is more of a *descriptive* fact. Christians in the majority world are accustomed to living side by side with actual practitioners of non-Christian religions, and they have been able to articulate the normative primacy of Christ in the midst of this pluralistic milieu. Any theology of religions today must be articulated from the perspective of the global church, not the dwindling community of Enlightenment scholarship.

### *Building a Theology of Religions on the Restated Classic Paradigm*

An evangelical theology of religions need not abandon the widely used classic paradigm, although allowing a fourth position to reflect a postmodern perspective, as Knitter has proposed, is a helpful and important addition to the paradigm. It remains important to use the classic or the modified paradigm since this paradigm remains the starting point of how the discussion has been framed. However, "the paradigm" needs to be revised. We will begin by looking at the nomenclature of the paradigm as a whole. In keeping with the first standard, we will suggest more descriptive terminology, as well as seek to explore what we can learn from the performative practices of each of the positions. Then, we will focus just on the traditional evangelical view and demonstrate how the remaining principles will help to strengthen an evangelical theology of religions.

First, an evangelical theology of religions should *embrace more precise and descriptive terms while at the same time recognizing what we can learn from the performative practice of each position in the actual give-and-take of interreligious encounter*. In keeping with the first principle, I propose changes in the way each of the positions within the paradigm are described. In doing so, I earnestly seek to create a phrase that is not only more descriptively accurate, but also one that adherents of that position can recognize and affirm as their own. Thus, exclusivism should be renamed *revelatory particularism*. The word *revelatory* stresses the importance of revelation (both in scripture and in Jesus Christ) in the evangelical view. An evangelical theology of religions can never relinquish the normative nature of biblical revelation or the final primacy of Jesus Christ. The word *particularism* emphasizes the primacy of Jesus Christ and is more precise than the word *exclusivistic*, which is understood by some

to mean that we are intent on excluding people, when the intended focus is on the exclusivity and primacy of Jesus Christ. The word *particularism* also protects the evangelical view from proposals that are Christocentric but become untethered from the historicity of the Incarnation in favor of a cosmic Christ, which in practice often becomes disconnected from the apostolic proclamation concerning Jesus Christ.

Inclusivism should be known as *universal inclusivism*. This emphasizes the universal scope that lies at the heart of inclusivism's claim, trumping even the epistemological need to personally respond to the gospel message. Inclusivism has the performative function of reminding all of us that God's revelation extends beyond the propositions of biblical revelation. The Reformer John Calvin pointed out that God Himself "has endued all men with some idea of his Godhead, the memory of which he constantly renews and occasionally enlarges."<sup>58</sup> In this context, the Reformer refers to the "sense of the Divine" (*sensus divinitatis*) and the universal "germ of religion" (*semen religionis*). Likewise, Augustine, in his *Confessions*, speaks of the "loving memory" of God that lies latent even in unbelievers.<sup>59</sup> While we must be careful not to allow general revelation to swallow up special revelation, we must not relinquish the basic truth that there is a continuity between the two and that even in the encounter with other religions, God has not left Himself without a witness.

Pluralism should be renamed *dialogic pluralism*, reflecting the performative interest in engaging the religious other with openness and humility. Evangelicals sometimes have been too wary of interreligious dialogue and have taken an overly defensive posture in engaging the honest questions and objections from those in non-Christian religions. Evangelical writer Gerald McDermott, in *Can Evangelicals Learn from World Religions?* has ably demonstrated that there are many things we can learn from the honest encounter with practitioners of world religions.

Finally, the postmodern "acceptance" model of Knitter should be renamed *narrative postmodernism*. While much of the postmodern worldview is incompatible with biblical revelation, the performative emphasis on narrative is very helpful. Evangelicals often have equated the biblical message with a short list of doctrinal propositions, unnecessarily separating our proclamation about Christ from the myriad of ways in which the gospel intersects our lives. We must take the individual religious narratives of those we encounter very seriously, even as we seek to connect them to the larger metanarrative of the gospel.

In short, an evangelical theology of religions should be able to embrace the positive performative qualities of each position. We should embrace the “hospitality” of openness, which is characterized by pluralists. We should learn from the inclusivists’ eagerness to see that the *missio dei* transcends the particularities of the Church’s work of mission and witness in the world. We should take notice of the importance of biblical and personal narrative in the way we communicate the gospel.

The remaining four principles will be applied to the evangelical position renamed as revelatory particularism.

Second, *revelatory particularism should be articulated within a Trinitarian context*. This application of the second standard reminds us that the Christian gospel is unintelligible apart from the doctrine of the Trinity, since the doctrine of the Trinity is both the foundation and the goal of all Christian theologizing. This is the most practical way to keep all interreligious and intrareligious discussions within a broad theological frame that represents the fullness of the Christian proclamation.

God the Father is the source of all revelation. This connects particularism with the doctrine of creation and helps to maintain a robust view of general revelation. We can affirm that every religion, in various ways, contains “the silent work of God.”<sup>60</sup> They reflect God’s activity in the human heart and the human quest for God. Religions also reflect our unending attempts to flee from God, even in the guise of religious activity. As Calvin Shenk has observed, human religion reflects both “cries for help and efforts of self-justification,”<sup>61</sup> The Reformers insight fully applied the “law and gospel” theme to other religions by noting that other religions can serve one of the classic purposes of “law”; namely, they can create such despair and unanswered questions in the life of the adherent that he or she comes to the gospel of God’s grace.<sup>62</sup>

God the Holy Spirit, as the agent of the New Creation, helps to place revelatory particularism within an eschatological context. For Christians, salvation is far more than the doctrine of justification. Salvation involves becoming full participants in the New Creation, which is already breaking into the present order. As we explored in chapter 6, this touches upon every aspect of culture.

Finally, at the heart of Trinitarianism is Jesus Christ, who is the apex of God’s revelation and the ultimate standard by which all is judged. Rather than comparing and contrasting Christianity with other religions, we measure all religions, including Christianity, against the revelation of

Jesus Christ, who is the embodiment of the New Creation. This is why it is important that an evangelical theology of religions be both Trinitarian and Christocentric.

This has important implications for the practice of interreligious dialogue, which often compares doctrines or experiences between two religions. For example, if a Hindu and a Christian are in a dialogue about the doctrine of karma, the only intelligible response from a Christian would be to relate the doctrine of karma to the Christian proclamation of the grace found in Jesus Christ. If a Muslim and a Christian are in a dialogue comparing Qur'anic and biblical views of revelation, it would only be a form of theological reductionism if the Christian did not point out that, for the Christian, the greatest form of revelation is embodied and personal in Jesus Christ. In short, the Trinity, and Jesus Christ in particular, is the hub around which all the doctrinal spokes of the Christian proclamation are held together. The particularity of Christ is crucial because Christianity always has claimed that there has been a very specific historical intervention by God, which is an "irruption of the timeless into time, by taking on of flesh by the Godhead."<sup>63</sup> God who is always "subject," never "object," has voluntarily placed Himself into the place of "object" for a while, to be seen, touched, and observed. Therefore, Christ represents the ultimate revelation of the whole Trinity. Jesus' life and ministry was empowered by God the Holy Spirit, and Jesus declared, "Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father" (John 14:9).

Third, *revelatory particularism embraces a canonical principle that asserts that the Bible is central to our understanding of God's self-disclosure*. God addresses fallen humanity not only in the Word made flesh but also in the Word that has been inscripturated into the biblical text. Revelatory particularists affirm without qualification that "all Scripture is God-breathed" and therefore "useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness" (2 Tim. 3:16). The third principle insists that all insights from general revelation, or the particular claims of other religions, must be tested against the biblical revelation and against the person and work of Jesus Christ. Firm belief in personal and propositional revelation is the only sure way to deliver us from the abyss of relativism, endless human speculations, or, worse, the notion that religions are nothing more than pragmatic, consumer preferences in a global religious marketplace. As noted earlier, it is not enough to simply state that revelatory particularists affirm the three nonnegotiables. An evangelical theology of religions must

be articulated within the larger frame of the entire canonical witness. Furthermore, we should always remember that the gospel is good news to be proclaimed. We are called to be witnesses of Jesus Christ, even in the context of interreligious dialogue.

Fourth, *revelatory particularism positions an evangelical theology of religions within the context of the missio dei*. In keeping with the fourth principle, it is only through the lens of the *missio dei* that a theology of religions can be fully related to the whole frame of biblical theology. Central to the *missio dei* is the understanding that through speech and actions, God is on a mission to redeem and bless all nations. In that sense, Kevin Vanhoozer is correct when he argues that God's self-disclosure is fundamentally theo-dramatic. In other words, revelation does not come down separate from human culture and context, as in Islam. Instead, God enters into and interacts with human narratives and thereby is set within a *dramatic, missional* context.

The gospel is the greatest drama ever conceived. The divine theodrama begins with creation and the human response to God's rule, which we call the Fall. God responds to the Fall by initiating a redemptive covenant with Abraham, which includes a commitment to bless all nations. The theater of God's self-disclosure is the stage of human history, which Calvin referred to as the *theatrum gloriae Dei* (theater of the glory of God).<sup>64</sup> God Himself is the primary actor, in creation, in redemption, and in the New Creation. God acts and God speaks, and human history, including religious history and narratives, is the response to God's actions and words. God's deliverance of Israel from Egypt represents on a small scale what God intends to do with the entire human race on a deeper level. Vanhoozer points out that as the divine drama unfolded, there were many dramatic tensions that made it difficult to discern how God would keep His promise to Abraham and bless all nations. The death and resurrection of Christ represents the resolution of the tensions.<sup>65</sup> Sin and death are defeated, the New Creation is inaugurated, and the Spirit is sent to continue unfolding the drama of God's redemptive plan. An evangelical theology of religions should always be set forth within the larger context of the drama of the *missio dei*.

Finally, *revelatory particularism should be both evangelical and catholic*. Evangelical means being committed to the centrality of Christ, historic Christian orthodoxy, and the urgency to proclaim the gospel in word and deed, calling the world to repentance and faith. Evangelical faith

helps us to remember the center of the gospel. However, we are catholic in the sense that we share a unity with all members of the body of Christ throughout the world. A robust commitment to ecumenism strengthens the whole church as long as it is bounded by the centrality of Christ and the principle of canonicity. We believe that “the *one* gospel is best understood in dialogue with the *many* saints.”<sup>66</sup> The fifth standard reminds us that the entire global church brings different experiences and perspective on how to articulate the Christian faith within the context of religious pluralism without being hampered by the governing philosophical assumptions of the Enlightenment. The emergence of the global church represents a unique opportunity to recover biblical catholicity, which, as the Apostles’ Creed reminds us, is one of the marks of the true church.

## Conclusion

Retaining the classic paradigm with these modifications allows us to continue to engage in interreligious discussions within a commonly understood paradigm. However, the more precise nomenclature of the four positions, coupled with the broad outline on how to build upon the position of revelatory particularism, will help to invigorate evangelical involvement in interreligious dialogue, clarify our public witness in the midst of religious pluralism, and enable us to remain in consonance with the witness of the global church throughout history and around the world.

## End Notes

<sup>1</sup> For more on this, see my “Ministries for Which We Teach: A World Cafe Model,” in *Revitalizing Practice: Collaborative Models for Theological Faculties*, ed. Malcolm L. Warford (New York, NY: Peter Lang, 2008). I examined more than forty different M.Div. required curriculums across the theological spectrum of ATS membership schools.

<sup>2</sup> I have argued this elsewhere in other publications. See, for example, Tennent, *Christianity at the Religious Roundtable: Evangelicalism in Conversation with Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2002) and *Theology in the Context of World Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2007).

<sup>3</sup> I am reminded of Andrew Walls’s insightful statement during my doctoral studies at the University of Edinburgh, when he said that “theological scholarship needs a renaissance of mission studies.”

<sup>4</sup> Daniel L. Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), 30.

<sup>5</sup> Compare, for example, Harold Netland, *Dissonant Voices* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991) with his later publication, *Encountering Religious Pluralism* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), especially, 47-54. See also Amos Yong, *Beyond the Impasse: Toward a Pneumatological Theology of Religions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003). I share many of these concerns. See Tennent, *Christianity at the Religious Roundtable*.

<sup>6</sup> Paul F. Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2002).

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

<sup>8</sup> Sometimes called restrictivism or Christocentric exclusivism.

<sup>9</sup> Hendrick Kraemer, *The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World* (London, UK: Edinburgh House, 1938).

<sup>10</sup> Kraemer's disdain for general revelation is clearly influenced by Karl Barth. However, to borrow a metaphor from a letter A. G. Hogg wrote to Lesslie Newbigin in 1937, the Barthian bull pursued the matador of modernism into the china shop and disposed of him there at a destructive cost of many precious things. A proper view of general revelation is certainly one of the more unfortunate losses in Barth's neoorthodoxy.

<sup>11</sup> Kraemer, *The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World*, 74.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 113.

<sup>13</sup> Ronald Nash, *Is Jesus the Only Savior?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994).

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 21. Nash is quoting Bruce Demarest, *General Revelation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1982), 69-70.

<sup>15</sup> Gerald R. McDermott, *Can Evangelicals Learn from World Religions?* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000); Netland, *Encountering Religious Pluralism*.

<sup>16</sup> For a modern treatment of exclusivism, see John P. Newport, *Life's Ultimate Questions* (Dallas, TX: Word, 1989). For a vigorous defense of exclusivism but one that ultimately leaves the fate of the unevangelized as a mystery known only to God, see Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995).

<sup>17</sup> Charles Darwin (1809-1882) published his landmark *On the Origin of Species by means of Natural Selection* in 1859. Later, Herbert Spencer (1820-1903) demonstrated how evolution should be applied to all areas of human existence.

<sup>18</sup> See, for example, Max Muller, *Origin and Growth of Religion* (Varanasi, India: Indological Book House, 1964).

<sup>19</sup> See, J. N. Farquhar, *The Crown of Hinduism* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1913). This classic work was reprinted in 1971 by Oriental Books Reprint Corporation in New Delhi. See also T. E. Slater, *Higher Hinduism in Relation to Christianity* (London, UK: E. Stock, 1903).

<sup>20</sup> Stuart Hackett, *The Reconstruction of the Christian Revelation Claim* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1984), 244.

<sup>21</sup> *Lumen Gentium*, 16, as quoted in “Dialogue and Mission: Conflict or Convergence?” *International Review of Mission* 76, no. 299 (July 1986): 223. In another Vatican II statement, the *Constitution* declares that “since Christ died for all men, and since the ultimate vocation of man is in fact one, and divine, we ought to believe that the Holy Spirit in a manner known only to God offers to every man the possibility of being associated with his paschal mystery” (*Gaudium et Spes.*, 22). While Vatican II endorsed most of Rahner’s theology of religions, it did not officially endorse the notion of an “anonymous Christian.” So, there remains some differences between the inclusivism of Karl Rahner and the inclusivism of official Roman Catholic dogma.

<sup>22</sup> For a full treatment of the inclusivist position, see Clark Pinnock, *A Wideness in God’s Mercy: The Finality of Jesus Christ in a World of Religions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1992), and John Sanders, *No Other Name: An Investigation into the Destiny of the Unevangelized* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1992).

<sup>23</sup> Karl Rahner, “Christianity and the Non-Christian Religions,” in *Christianity and Other Religions*, ed. John Hick and Brian Hebblethwaite (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1980). Rahner’s most complete treatment can be found in volumes 5 and 6 of his 20-volume *Theological Investigations* (New York, NY: Seabury, 1966-1983). Another, more accessible, defense of inclusivism may be found in E. Hillman’s *The Wider Ecumenism: Anonymous Christianity and the Church* (London, UK: Burns and Oates; New York: Herder and Herder, 1968). A well-known application of inclusivism specifically to the Hindu context may be found in R. Panikkar’s *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism* (London, UK: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1964).

<sup>24</sup> John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989), 240.

<sup>25</sup> Gordon Kaufman, “Religious Diversity, Historical Consciousness, and Christian Theology,” in *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness*, ed. John Hick and Paul F. Knitter (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1987), 5.

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<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> See Hick and Knitter, eds., *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness*.

<sup>28</sup> George Lindbeck, *Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1984), 42.

<sup>29</sup> Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religion*, 183.

<sup>30</sup> Lindbeck, *Nature of Doctrine*, 42.

<sup>31</sup> S. Mark Heim, *Salvations: Truth and Difference in Religions* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1995).

<sup>32</sup> S. Mark Heim, *The Depth of Riches: A Trinitarian Theology of Religious Ends* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), 175.

<sup>33</sup> Lindbeck, *Nature of Doctrine*, 134. Lindbeck makes it clear that the term *postmodern* or *post-revisionist* can be used instead of *postliberal* (p. 135).

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 130.

<sup>35</sup> Netland, *Encountering Religious Pluralism*, 224.

<sup>36</sup> John Hick, *A Christian Theology of Religions: The Rainbow of Faiths* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1995), 18.

<sup>37</sup> Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, 52.

<sup>38</sup> George Sumner, *The First and the Last* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), 3.

<sup>39</sup> Clark Pinnock, "Toward an Evangelical Theology of Religions," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 33, no. 3 (September 1990): 363, n. 12.

<sup>40</sup> Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions*, 74.

<sup>41</sup> J. A. van Rooy, "Christ and the Religions: The Issues at Stake," *Missionalia* 13, no.1 (April 1985), 9.

<sup>42</sup> L. T. Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, Sacra Pagina (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1992), 319.

<sup>43</sup> This claim is made by several Islamic groups in Indonesia as well as by the Hindu Ramakrishna, who claimed that all the religions of the world are contained within Hinduism.

<sup>44</sup> See, for example, my chapters "Hindu Sacred Texts in Pre-Christian Past" and "Is 'Salvation by Grace Through Faith' Unique to Christianity?" in *Theology in the Context of World Christianity*.

<sup>45</sup> Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions*, 31.

<sup>46</sup> Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 170.

<sup>47</sup> N. J. Rengger, "Negative Dialect? The Two Modes of Critical Theory in World Politics," chap. 9 in Richard Wyn Jones, ed., *Critical Theory and World Politics* (London, UK: Lynne Rienner, 2000), 92.

<sup>48</sup> David Wells, *God in the Wasteland: The Reality of Truth in a World of Fading Dreams* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 104.

<sup>49</sup> Sumner, *The First and the Last*, 5.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>51</sup> Yong, *Beyond the Impasse*, 43.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 103.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 167.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 159-60.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 167.

<sup>57</sup> Jerome Paul Soneson, *Pragmatism and Pluralism* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1993), 137.

<sup>58</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, vol. 1 (1.3.1), trans. Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1957), 43.

<sup>59</sup> Augustine, *Confessions* (7.17.23), trans., Henry Chadwick, Oxford World's Classics (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1998), 128.

<sup>60</sup> J. H. Bavinck, *The Church Between Temple and Mosque: A Study of the Relationship Between the Christian Faith and Other Religions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1966), 200.

<sup>61</sup> Calvin E. Shenk, *Who Do You Say That I Am? Christians Encounter Other Religions* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1997), 75.

<sup>62</sup> Terry Tiessen, following the work of Mariasuasai Dhavamony, makes the observation that cosmic religions focus on the revelation of God in creation, ethical religions reflect that the divine absolute makes Himself known in the human conscience, and salvific religions are a response to the awareness of the Fall and the need for salvation. See Terry Tiessen, "God's Work of Grace in the Context of the Religions," *Διδαοκαλία* 18, no. 1 (Winter 2007): 167-168.

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<sup>63</sup> Richard Holloway, *Signs of Glory* (London, UK: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1982), 5.

<sup>64</sup> Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1.14.20 and 2.6.1), 156, 293.

<sup>65</sup> Kevin 1. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 42.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.



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