



Evangelical Interfaith Dialogue

SPRING 2010 • ISSUE 1.2

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Theologies of Religions

INTRODUCTION: MATTHEW KRABILL

Trinity and Religious Pluralism

In the inaugural issue of this journal, we argued that there is a major need for American evangelicals to engage in critical theological reflection on issues related to interfaith dialogue. Dr. Douglas McConnell's paper "Missional Principles for Interfaith Dialogue" explored the relationship of interfaith dialogue to the larger mission that Christians make disciples of all nations. In this second issue of the journal, we examine another major issue related to interfaith dialogue—Christian responses to religious pluralism.

In his paper prepared for the advent of the centenary celebration of the Edinburgh Missionary Conference of 1910, Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen argues that the issue of religious plurality is the most urgent challenge the Church faces at the beginning of the twenty-first century, and as a result, necessitates critical Christian theological reflection.

Kärkkäinen affirms that while Christian theology and its respective ecclesiastical traditions do not speak uniformly in response to religious pluralism or what is called a theology of religions, the typology of exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism has commonly been used to navigate our religiously plural landscape. Kärkkäinen asserts that these categories are predicated on a "dynamic tension"—one that attempts to reconcile two juxtaposed biblical truths: that God wishes all people to be saved and that salvation is found only in Jesus Christ. Likewise, while acknowledging that the most foundational and least negotiable tenet of faith for all Christians is the trinitarian confession, Kärkkäinen acknowledges that the topic of the Trinity may not be the best starting point in an interfaith encounter. What is important for Kärkkäinen is that a theology of religions be grounded on a solid trinitarian understanding of the role and relationship between the Father, Son, and Spirit.

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VISION STATEMENT

This journal seeks to create space for Evangelical scholars and practitioners to dialogue about the dynamics, challenges, practices, and theology surrounding interfaith work, while remaining faithful to the gospel of Jesus and his mission for his church.

AIMS OF THIS JOURNAL

In light of our commitment to the authority of Scripture and the gospel of Jesus Christ, this journal seeks to:

- ground interfaith dialogue in the *missio dei*
- create space for pioneering Evangelical approaches to interfaith dialogue, drawing on a robust biblical, theological, missiological, and psychological foundation
- wrestle together publicly and as a community on the challenges, opportunities, and dangers of engaging in interfaith dialogue
- begin to heal the divisions within Evangelicalism between mission and dialogue by articulating the missiological guidelines for dialogue
- foster discussion on interfaith issues between faculty, students, and practitioners from Evangelical traditions from across the globe

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THIS ISSUE'S RESPONSES AT A GLANCE:

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KYLE DAVID BENNETT explores the "how" of Kärkkäinen's approach to interfaith dialogue through an Augustinian perspective. He challenges us to favor being ecclesio-considerate rather than ecclesio-centric in dialogue. As a result, an evangelical's relationship with Christ is reflected in worship, and God is known through our worship. Thus Bennett contends that dialogue should include the opportunity for a mutual observation and participation of each respective worship experience.

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JOHN W. MOREHEAD offers supplemental reflections to Kärkkäinen's theology of religions. In order for us to be faithful practitioners within this theological framework, numerous factors are at play, not the least of which includes attention to one's emotional attitude toward other religions as well as a focus on Other-centered hospitality. In addition, Morehead argues that formulating one's theology of religions through a pneumatological lens might take the conversation forward in new and creative ways.

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DR. EVELYN A. REISACHER challenges us to broaden our discussion on interfaith dialogue to include the contrasting dynamics between academic and grassroots interfaith contexts. In light of this, she calls for a "re-exploration" of biblical resources that would inform our attitudes toward other faiths. We do not do this in isolation, Dr. Reisacher assures us, as pluralism is part and parcel of the historic foundation and lived experience of many societies, particularly in non-Western contexts.

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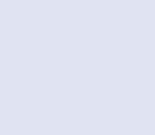
DR. DENNIS OCKHOLM affirms Kärkkäinen's skillful handling of two juxtaposed biblical truths: God wishes all people to be saved and salvation is found only in Jesus. However, he critiques Kärkkäinen's starting point for a Christian view of religious plurality, arguing that a Christian must begin with "the faithfulness of the God who has disclosed himself in Jesus Christ." It is beginning with this allegiance to Christ, rather than a pluralistic theocentrism, that allows for both a forthright dialogue and an attitude of humble service and love for our neighbor.

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ROBERT COVOLO unpacks the complexity of Kärkkäinen's article, veiled by the seeming simplicity of its central themes. Although Kärkkäinen uses the standard categories of exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism to organize his argument, Covolo demonstrates both his rationale and his awareness of the limitations behind this methodology. Thus Covolo, while calling attention to our preconceived categories, contends that Kärkkäinen displays wisdom in his decisions to maintain what is ultimately a trinitarian criteria, such that his theology of religions is indeed a Christian theology.

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JEN ROSNER reflects on her experiences in interfaith dialogue, illustrating that long-awaited bridges can be built among Jews and Christians. While remaining dedicated to both Jesus and the importance of reconciliation, Rosner emphasizes the need for vulnerability in interreligious encounters. Such an attitude prepares us to understand ourselves just as much as the "other."



FEATURED ARTICLE

Theologies of Religions

A Position Paper for Edinburgh 2010

BY VELI-MATTI KÄRKKÄINEN

The Many Dimensions of Interfaith Encounters

THE recent document “Religious plurality and Christian self-understanding”¹ reminds us of the most prominent challenge the Christian Church faces in the beginning of the third millennium:

Today Christians in almost all parts of the world live in religiously plural societies. Persistent plurality and its impact on their daily lives are forcing them to seek new and adequate ways of understanding and relating to peoples of other religious traditions ...

All religious communities are being reshaped by new encounters and relationships.... There is greater awareness of the interdependence of human life, and of the need to collaborate across religious barriers in dealing with the pressing problems of the world. All religious traditions, therefore, are challenged to contribute to the emergence of a global community that would live in mutual respect and peace.

While not a new challenge—just think of the calling of our forefather Abraham from the polytheistic Ur of the Chaldees or the walk of St. Paul around the altar to the “unknown god” in Athens—the intensity and urgency of the interfaith challenge today is unprecedented. Whereas in the past, other religions were “out there,” in today’s world—with mass communication, increased migration, and sophisticated technology, as

well as a general mindset that celebrates diversity—religious encounters happen as much in our very neighborhoods as in “mission fields” or other exotic locations.

While Christian theology has always paid some attention to theological issues regarding interfaith encounters, particularly during times of heightened tensions—such as those in North Africa with Islam in the seventh century, or when new opportunities were looming large such as with the neo-Hindu Reform’s interest in Christ in nineteenth-century India—only in recent decades has this topic risen to the center of reflection. Religious plurality is not only a sociological, cultural, and political challenge, as much as it is all of that; it is also a deeply theological issue: “Our theological understanding of religious plurality begins with our faith in the one God who created all things, the living God present and active in all creation from the beginning. The Bible testifies to God as God of all nations and peoples, whose love and compassion includes all humankind.”²

Technically called Christian theology of religions, this discipline attempts to account theologically for the meaning and value of other religions, particularly in missionary and other encounter situations. Theology of religions is the Christian Church’s reflection on the meaning of living with people of other faiths and the relationship of Christianity to other religions.

Theology of religions, however, is more than theology and doctrine. It has everything to do with our attitudes, mindset, love, ability to relate to the Other, and

so forth. In other words, thinking and loving, reflection and relating matter. In fact, they are all indispensable. One error is to concentrate solely on theological and doctrinal analysis. Anyone who has lived in multifaith environments knows from experience that people of faith meet at the personal level, which may foster mutual understanding, coexistence, and the feeling of neighborhood—or misunderstanding, suspicion, and even conflict. Another error, similarly critical, is to bracket out all theological issues for the sake of alleged “dialogue”—be it the doctrine of the Trinity in relation to Muslims, the question of the ultimate religious end in relation to Hindus, or the issue of human personality/self in relation to Buddhists. This mistaken approach can also take the form of focusing exclusively on religious collaboration in sociopolitical and ecological improvement to the exclusion of any doctrinal conversations.

As we attempt a balanced approach, it is necessary to seek out resources at various levels of interfaith encounters. Naming them levels of “dialogue,” Stanley J. Samartha of India distinguishes (1) *dialogue of life*, in which participants are more concerned with issues that pertain to daily living and common values; (2) *dialogue of action*, which involves common work for justice and shared concerns such as HIV/AIDS and the cause of the poor; (3) *dialogue of experience*, which concerns daily spiritual experience and expressions; and (4) *dialogue of experts*, which is interested in theology and philosophy of the faith traditions.³ All these levels feed both mutual understanding and a missionary encounter.

The Diversity of Christian Responses

While all Christian churches today acknowledge the urgency and challenge of interfaith issues, Christian theology does not speak in a uniform way. In order to properly orient the discussion, it is useful to map out the kaleidoscopic diversity of views across ecclesiastical traditions and theological persuasions. This makes the theology of religions discourse also an intra-Christian ecumenical conversation and learning process.

LOOKING BACK AT HISTORY

“...there have not been (at least to my knowledge) any self-pronounced “pluralists” among Christian theologians before the time of the Enlightenment—even universalists such as Origen attributed the salvation of all to the purposes of the Christian God, the only God. But neither is it that a more inclusivist attitude has not existed all through history.”

An Introduction to the Theology of Religions: Biblical, Historical, and Contemporary Perspectives,
by Veli-Matti Kärkäinen

The most common way of trying to make sense of the maze of Christian responses to other religions is the three-fold typology of exclusivism, pluralism, and inclusivism. Exclusivists hold that salvation is available only in Jesus Christ and that a personal response of faith is necessary. On the other end of the spectrum, for pluralists other religions are legitimate means of salvation. In the pluralistic mindset, there is a rough parity between religions, and therefore, there are many ways to God, more or less equal. The mediating group, Inclusivists, hold that while salvation can only be found in Christ, its benefits have been made universally available even to those who have not heard the gospel. In other words, the inclusivist view maintains that among the saved there might be a great number of people from other faiths who never heard of Christ but for

whom Christ died, and who in some way or another were already “turning” to the God of the Bible by following the light given in the structure of their own religion, and trying as best as they could to follow moral precepts.

The exclusivist option, in one form or another, has been by far the most common view among Christians and missionaries throughout Christian history. It was not until the advent of modernity in the eighteenth century that serious doubts were targeted against that confidence. Currently, the conservative segment of Christianity most strongly sticks with the traditional exclusivist position. From the perspective of the whole worldwide Christian church today, though, the largest group of Christians belong to the inclusivist camp, because that is the official position of the Roman Catholic Church as defined by Vatican Council II in the 1960s. Differently from Pluralism, that view is strongly Christocentric in its insistence that salvation can be found only in Christ. At the same time, unlike exclusivism, inclusivism opens the door of salvation to many who never heard the gospel. While pluralistic forces are vocal in the academia and among the specialists, pluralism has not gained much following among ordinary believers and clergy, let alone missionaries. Among the mainline Protestants and Anglicans, a negotiation is under way between traditional exclusivism and (Catholic-type) inclusivism.

The Dynamic Tension

Without unduly simplifying a complex set of issues, it can be said that the main question of theology of religions culminates in the negotiation of two basic biblical affirmations. The first is the foundational biblical teaching according to which God “wants all men [and women] to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth” (1 Tim 2:3). A number of biblical passages such as John 3:16 speak of God’s universal love and desire not to forsake anyone. Balancing this principle of the “optimism of salvation” is another equally strong biblical conviction, namely, that “Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12). Another way

of expressing this principle of the “particularity of salvation” is John 14:6: “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” The way one negotiates this seemingly simple dialectic has everything to do with one’s theology of religions.

The biblical materials concerning the early church’s view of other religions and other gods are scarce. What can be said safely is that the first church adopted the Jewish monotheism (based on Deut. 6:4) and held to the universality of God’s person and nature, as well as the common origin and destiny of all people (Acts 17:28). At the same time, an intensive, intentional evangelization of all people is evident, both toward Jews and Gentiles.

The dynamic tension between the dark picture of humanity in Romans 1 and the affirmation of the relative value of religiosity in Paul’s Athens address in Acts 17 brings home the complex nature of the continuity and discontinuity with regard to (other) religions. Early Christian theology followed this dynamic line. While taking for granted the superiority of the Christian faith and the need to proclaim Christ as the only Savior, at times the Fathers showed a limited openness towards other religions, and often welcomed non-Christian philosophical insights. This dynamic is aptly illustrated in the title of a recent book by the Canadian Baptist Clark Pinnock, *A Wideness in God’s Mercy: The Finality of Jesus Christ in a World of Religions* (1992) and elaborated by the late Jesuit missionary theologian Jacques Dupuis in his discussion of the implications of Romans 1 and Acts 17:

Discontinuity places the stress on the radical newness of Christ and his resurrection and by contrast sees the ancient world as darkness and sin. That is the viewpoint of Rom 1. The continuity, on the contrary, underlines the homogeneity of salvation unfolding according to God’s plan. It is the viewpoint of Acts 17, which, where the religion of gentiles is concerned, presents a Greek world waiting for the unknown

God and prepared by its poet-theologians to meet him.⁴

Trinitarian Faith as the Christian Criterion

The most foundational tenet of faith for all Christian churches is the trinitarian confession of Father, Son, and Spirit. The one God of the Old Testament, *Yahweh*, is the Father of Jesus Christ who came to save us in the power of the Spirit. As much as the confession of the Triune God may be a stumbling block to interfaith encounters, particularly with our

the Father does, the Son and Spirit are involved as well, and vice versa.

Similarly failing are approaches to other religions and mission that have a tendency to minimize the church and speak only of the Kingdom of God and the building of the Kingdom as the only goal. That is to fail to recognize the fact that the Kingdom, the rule of God, is in itself a trinitarian process: The Son comes in the power of the Spirit to usher in the Father's righteous rule, graciously allowing the community "instituted" by

though they had never yet received God's (special) revelation.

"Salvation Belongs to God"

Theology of religions discourse has tended to focus too much on the question of the access to salvation of people in other faiths. On the one hand, the pluralistic views tend to compromise the uniqueness of the offer of salvation in Christ by making all faiths legitimate avenues of salvation. This is a statement in conflict with both Christian and other religions' convictions. Christian tradi-

Making Jesus merely an ethical teacher (as in classical liberalism) or only one "incarnation" among others (as in extreme pluralism)—an embodiment of the Deity, a.k.a. Hindu avatars—truncates not only the confession of the Trinity but also the biblical understanding of Christ.

Muslim brothers and sisters, that confession cannot be compromised even for the sake of dialogue. At the same time, it doesn't have to be the first topic to be discussed, either!

Trinity determines the Christian view of Christ as well. Only when Christ is confessed as truly divine and truly human, following the ancient symbols (creeds) of faith confessed by all Christian churches, can the Christian doctrine of the Trinity be maintained. Making Jesus merely an ethical teacher (as in classical liberalism) or only one "incarnation" among others (as in extreme pluralism)—an embodiment of the Deity, a.k.a. Hindu *avatars*—truncates not only the confession of the Trinity but also the biblical understanding of Christ.

Many problems in theologies of religions derive from a less than satisfactory conception of the Trinity. A typical pitfall is the pluralistic "theocentric" effort to replace Jesus as the Way for the more elusive concept of God at the "center" to whom many "ways" lead. In a healthy trinitarian faith, Father and Son presuppose each other and can never be set in opposition. A similarly appealing error is the turn to the "Spirit," which hopes to get around the centrality of Jesus and Father and makes the work of the Spirit independent from that of Father and Son. According to classic trinitarian faith, the works of the Trinity in the world (*ad extra*) are indivisible: in everything that

Christ and "constituted" by the Spirit (Orthodox John Zizioulas)—the People of God, the Body of Christ, the Temple of the Spirit—to participate in its coming. Of course, the Kingdom is far wider than the church; but the church serves as the sign, anticipation, and tool of the coming rule of God.

If the Triune God is the Creator of the world, it means that, on the one hand, there is some kind of preliminary knowledge and awareness of God among all people who have been created in the image of God and that, on the other hand, all such knowledge, rather than being a human invention, has its source in the God of the Bible. As the early apologist Justin Martyr taught us, the "seeds" of the Logos (the Word), as a result of the Spirit's universal presence, can be found in all cultures and religions. The human being as the image of God is "open" to receive revelation wherever truth—even partial and in broken form—can be found in the world and religions.

This is not to minimize the necessity of God's full self-revelation in Christ, communicated to the peoples of the world through the missionary proclamation of the gospel. On the contrary, it is to give glory to the Triune God who has already made preparations for the announcement of salvation in Christ. The Bible contains numerous examples of "pagan saints" who knew something—at times, even quite a lot—about God even

tion has always attributed salvation only to Christ. Followers of other religions would be offended to hear Christians tell them that their own faith does not offer any unique vision of salvation. On the other hand, the impression from exclusivism is that there is a tendency to open up the door of salvation as little as possible. This works against the all-embracing love of the Father, the all-penetrating presence of the Spirit, and the universal salvific effects of the Son.

The Christian Church has not been given the "keys" to unlock the Book of Life to know—let alone determine—who will be saved and who not. "It is ... humility that enables us to say that salvation belongs to God, God only. We do not possess salvation; we participate in it. We do not offer salvation; we witness to it. We do not decide who would be saved; we leave it to the providence of God. For our own salvation is an everlasting 'hospitality' that God has extended to us. It is God who is the 'host' of salvation."

The Church has been given a simple twofold message, namely, that Jesus is the Savior and that the Church is sent even to the ends of the earth to preach the gospel of Christ. Let the Church be faithful in that belief and mission.

"Othering" with Grace and Courage

Borrowing from the biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann, I make the term "other" a verb to remind us of the importance of seeing the religious Other not as

a counter-object but rather as “the risky, demanding, dynamic process of relating to one that is not us.”⁶ In the “dialogue of life” and “of experience,” what matters is the capacity to listen to the distinctive testimony of the Other, to patiently wait upon the Other, and make for him or her a safe space. Similarly, that kind of encounter gives the Christian an opportunity to share the distinctive testimony of the love of God. In order for that kind of mindset and attitude to evolve, Christian churches and congregations should be encouraged and empowered to initiate patient training and education with regard to issues such as the following:

- Raising the awareness and importance of interfaith engagement, which means venturing outside one’s own safety zone and making oneself vulnerable
- Helping deal graciously and in a determined way with our fears of the Other, which often include not only the generic fear of the “stranger” but also the tendency to “demonize” others’ religion and beliefs
- Facilitating the study of another religion in order to gain a more accurate portrayal of other persons’ beliefs and sensitivities, including the capacity to interpret the meaning of rites and rituals

An important aspect in the process of “othering” is to resist the tendency, so prevalent in secular societies of the global North and in many forms of religious pluralisms, to draw the Other under one’s own world-explanation and thus deny the existence and possibility of genuine differences among religions. It is an act of insult rather than a sign of tolerance to tell the believer of another faith that against his or her own self-understanding no real differences exist in beliefs, doctrines, and ultimate ends.

When the Other is allowed to be Other in his or her own distinctive way, a genuine interfaith encounter has the potential of facilitating both the receiving and giving of gifts. One of the Christian gifts is the sharing of an authentic, personal testimony to Christ, the Lord and Savior, with

a view to inviting people of other faiths to submit their lives to the God of the Bible. At the same time, the Christian receives a twofold gift, namely, learning about the Other and at times learning more about one’s own faith in the mirror of another faith. This is what the Roman Catholic Gavin D’Costa calls the Holy Spirit’s “invitation for mutual engagement.”⁷

With this in mind, Christians, along with representatives of other faiths of good will, should do their best to help governments and other authorities to secure a safe, noncoercive place for adherents of religions to present their testimonies without fear. The late missionary bishop Lesslie Newbigin reminded us of the fact that while for Christians the gospel is a “public truth,” it has nothing to do with a desire to return to the Christendom model in which the state seeks to enforce beliefs. That should be unacceptable to all religions. In a truly pluralistic society, decision for beliefs can never be a matter of power-based enforcement. When Christians, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, Sikhs, Confucians, and followers of other faiths can without fear and threat meet each other in a free “marketplace” of beliefs and ideologies, genuinely missionary encounters are also possible.

A powerful metaphor that has been adopted by many contemporary discourses on interfaith encounters is that of “hospitality,” a concept well represented in the biblical canon as well as in various cultural contexts. The above-cited ecumenical document “Religious plurality and Christian self-understanding” reminds us that “In the New Testament, the incarnation of the Word of God is spoken of by St. Paul in terms of hospitality and of a life turned towards the ‘other’ [Phil. 2:6-8].”⁸

Dialogue, Mission, and Tolerance

The recent Catholic interreligious document titled “Dialogue and Proclamation” encapsulates in a few pregnant sentences a holistic understanding by listing the principal elements of mission in terms of Christian “presence and witness; commitment to social development and human liberation; liturgical life, prayer and contemplation; interreligious dialogue; and finally, proclamation

and catechesis.” The document stresses that “Proclamation and dialogue are thus both viewed, each in its own place, as component elements and authentic forms of the one evangelizing mission of the Church. They are both oriented towards the communication of salvific truth.”⁹ In other words, interfaith dialogue includes and makes space for both proclamation, with a view to persuasion by the power of truth and love, and dialogue, with a view to facilitating mutual understanding, reconciliation, and harmony.

For the representatives of those religions that are missionary by nature, such as Christianity and Islam, any dialogue engagement also provides a legitimate opportunity to try to persuade the other parties of the supremacy of one’s own beliefs. Bishop Newbigin tirelessly reminded us that Christian faith—or any other missionary faith—that is not eager and willing to share its deepest convictions in the hope of being able to convince the Other, does not really believe in the truthfulness and value of its faith!

In order for the dialogue to be meaningful it takes both commitment to one’s own beliefs and openness to listen carefully to the Other. A true dialogue does not mean giving up one’s truth claims but rather entails patient and painstaking investigation of real differences and similarities. The purpose of the dialogue is not necessarily to soften the differences among religions, but rather to clarify both similarities and differences as well as issues of potential convergence and impasse. A successful, fruitful dialogue often ends up in mutual affirmation of differences, different viewpoints, and varying interpretations.

The contemporary secular mindset often mistakenly confuses tolerance for lack of commitment to any belief or opinion. That is to misunderstand the meaning of the term *tolerance*. Deriving from the Latin term meaning “to bear a burden,” tolerance is needed when real differences are allowed. Tolerance means patient and painstaking sharing, listening, and comparing notes—as well as the willingness to respectfully and lovingly

make space for continuing differences.

A religiously pluralistic environment and society call for tolerance that makes room for differences and facilitates mutual missionary enterprises, as long as those arise from the self-understanding of each religion.

Endnotes

- 1 "Religious plurality and Christian self-understanding," #2, 3. <http://bit.ly/religiousplurality>
- 2 "Religious plurality and Christian self-understanding," #27.
- 3 Stanley J. Samartha, *One Christ, Many Religions: Towards a Revised Christology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1991), 88.
- 4 Jacques Dupuis, *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1997), 50.
- 5 "Religious plurality and Christian self-understanding," #47.
- 6 Walter Brueggemann, *The Covenanted Self: Explorations in Law and Covenant* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1999), 1.
- 7 Gavin D'Costa, *The Meeting of Religions and the Trinity* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2000), 109-17.
- 8 "Religious plurality and Christian self-understanding," #27.
- 9 "Dialogue and Proclamation," by the Pontifical Council for Inter-Religious Dialogue (May 19, 1991), #2. <http://bit.ly/pontificalcouncil> (accessed 4/4/2009).

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Response: Kyle David Bennett

The Authenticity of Worship: An Augustinian Response and Contribution

In his essay, Kärkkäinen provides us with a concise introduction to the basic language, categories, and principles of interfaith dialogue. In addition to providing an argument for interfaith dialogue, he helpfully provides us with a theological foundation on which the discussion can take place. In this essay, I would like to take the conversation further by looking at interfaith dialogue

from a different perspective. Kärkkäinen delineated the "what" and "why" of interfaith dialogue; I would like to explore the "how." In particular, I would like to explore the "how" from an Augustinian perspective, considering the role the Church and its worship might have in interfaith dialogue. Augustine is hardly ever evoked in interfaith dialogue, but a close, creative reading of him can actually afford fecund resources for engaging in it.

Augustine believed that human beings are fundamentally lovers. They are always loving and being oriented by the things that they love; God created them this way. The opening lines of his *Confessions* highlight this: "You have made us for yourself and our hearts are restless until they find rest in you." (1.1). Because God created human beings in this way, Augustine argued, their whole life should thus be understood within the framework of love. What human beings pursue and attempt to acquire should be understood in light of the object of their love (*First Letter of John*, 5:7-8). Thus, the believer should be understood and assessed by her love for God and the unbeliever by her love for herself. Indeed, there are two "kinds of love" (*On Genesis*, 11.15) and both of these loves lead to different courses of action. In turn, these two courses of action lead to two different ways of being in the world, or "cities," as Augustine called them: the "city of God" and the "city of man."

Like his understanding of the human person, Augustine's understanding of the church was very dynamic and robust. He believed that the church participates in salvation and has a role in forming the love of its members. This led him to refer to the church as the *mater fidelium*, the mother of believers. What he meant by this is that God the Father uses the church to nurture believers in salvation, like a mother nurtures her child (*Sermons*, 216.7.7). God does this through its worship. Where the church is gathered in love for Christ, worshipping him in the power of the Spirit, God's eschatological reign is present, transforming believers and their love. He refines their love with his own (*City of God*, 10.3.2). Two important concepts are implied here that are worth

noting. First, to truly know and assess a human being and her actions, one must consider what she loves. Second, while she is known and assessed by what she loves, if she is a Christian, her love is formed and transformed by God, the object of her love, through her worship of him.

For many of us, interfaith dialogue is primarily viewed as a rational tussle. We are oriented by the desire to demonstrate our beliefs. We think that by demonstrating how our beliefs are consistent, we show how they are true, and conversely, by demonstrating how our interlocutor's beliefs are inconsistent, we show how they are false. But the focus here is solely on the logic of beliefs. While this logical tussle is indispensable, I wonder if it misses something necessary for



any real dialogue. What if Augustine is right and we are fundamentally lovers? What if who we are and what we do is intimately linked with our love and its object of worship? Can we really be understood and our faith assessed apart from this worship? Conversely, can we really understand and assess the faith of another apart from their worship? What if to truly understand another faith not only requires us to examine its beliefs, but to observe or, even more disturbingly, experience its worship?

If the church of Jesus Christ is a sign of the "coming rule of God," as Kärkkäinen rightly notes, then we should always be mindful that it is a witness to the truthfulness of God's self-disclosure

and claim on reality in the person and work of Jesus Christ. We often forget that the church is a work of God. The triune God is the creator and redeemer of all things, and the church is a testimony to this. Similarly, we often forget that God meets us in our worship. The triune God is eschatologically present in our midst, through our worship, and he himself testifies to his reality. We know he is real because he comes to us and we experience him. If indeed this is the case, shouldn't we invite others to church in order to experience his presence? Shouldn't we invite them to taste and see that he is good (Psalm 34:8)? While it may be terrifyingly uncomfortable, perhaps sometimes interfaith dialogue is more properly carried out by singing hymns in a sanctuary, listening to the Torah read in the synagogue, or praying at the mosque than sitting at Starbucks arguing over the problem of evil. Not that the latter is insignificant, only that from an Augustinian perspective, it is merely one part of understanding and assessing faith.

If our worship reveals who we truly are, perhaps it's time for us to invite our interfaith interlocutors to church to see us as we truly are and, even more importantly, experience God's presence in our fellowship and worship. Conversely, perhaps it's time for us to attend their worship. This does not mean that interfaith dialogue should be ecclesio-centric—only that it should be ecclesio-considerate. As evangelicals, this should hardly be strange for us. For if we believe that our faith is a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, then some aspect of our dialogue should include the opportunity for our interlocutor to experience this relationship in and through our worship, where our savior promises to meet us (Matthew 18:20). If true dialogue entails "patient and painstaking investigation of real differences and similarities," as Kärkkäinen rightly notes, then an Augustinian contribution to interfaith dialogue emphasizes that an investigation of real differences and similarities warrants at least some reference to worship, where all of us are authentically ourselves and the object of our love is manifested.

KYLE DAVID BENNETT is a PhD student at Fuller Seminary specializing in systematic theology and philosophy. His research interests include theological anthropology, ecclesiology, aesthetics, political philosophy, theology and culture, and philosophical issues in theology and science.

Endnote

- ¹ Experience does not necessarily imply participation. There is a passive and active aspect to experience. Here, I am primarily suggesting the passive aspect. That is, more of a spectation than a participation. That being said, however, participation should not be disregarded. Of course, there may be some observances and practices of worship that the Christian should not engage in and, in fact, boldly reject. But a wholesale abstinence from and rejection of all observances and practices of worship is hardly justified.

Response: John W. Morehead

Supplemental Reflections on Theologies of Religions

VELI-MATTI Kärkkäinen has shared his helpful thoughts on theology of religions as one of the pressing issues for Christians in the West in the twenty-first century. In addition to the reasons he cites for the necessity of this topic, we might also consider that our post-9/11 environment, fueled many times by religious contributions to tension and violence, adds additional urgency to this venture. In this article I will provide supplemental reflections on Dr. Kärkkäinen's overall thesis. Protestant evangelicalism has given recent evidence of promise in developing theologies of religions through the work of several scholars—only a few of which can be sampled as especially significant in this article. Space limitations preclude an extensive response on this topic, so what follows should be considered a summary introduction to additional points for consideration.

Before venturing into discussion of rational considerations related to theologies of religions it is important to consider the significance of emotional aspects. Writing on the subject of interreligious dialogue and evangelism, Terry Muck has stated that "[t]he affective

dimension has been shortchanged"¹ in this context, and the same is true by extension to the development of theologies of religions. Further defining his topic, Muck suggests an interesting alternative to interreligious dialogue "as an emotion or attitude toward people of other religious traditions."² He later quotes Stanley Samartha in this regard, who states that "Dialogue is a mood, a spirit, an attitude of love and respect towards neighbors of other faiths. It regards partners as persons, not statistics."³ Emotional considerations surely play a part in the development of theologies of religions, but a more conscious awareness of this phenomenon is needed. Theologies and apologetic responses to new religions, for example, have tended to be formed with negative and defensive attitudes as evangelicals have sought to define and defend theological boundaries against concerns over heresy and its possible intrusion into the church. While the influence of negative emotions in this context is perhaps understandable, the adoption of more positive emotional attitudes toward those in the new religions, indeed a dialogical attitude of love and respect, might provide for the development and implementation of more promising theologies of religions and engagement.

Moving from emotional considerations to the cognitive, Kärkkäinen includes a discussion of Christian responses to the religions with the familiar typology of exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism. But continued focus on these issues may limit consideration of other important aspects of theologies of religions that could help move the discussion forward. Amos Yong suggests that these categories "may have outworn their usefulness and are no longer viable."⁴ Instead, he has set forth a pneumatological theology of religions with a focus on the Spirit.⁵ Yong defines this as a theology in three ways, as one that "completes and fills out the Christian doctrine of the Trinity,"⁶ and as one that may be uniquely suited to address areas "where previous approaches have fallen short."⁷ To this end Yong writes:

I will argue that precisely because the Spirit is both universal and

BOOK REVIEW

The Future of Christian Learning: An Evangelical and Catholic Dialogue

Mark A. Noll and James Turner, edited by Thomas Albert Howard, Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2008.

Book Review by Donald Westbrook

Donald Westbrook is a PhD student in the School of Religion at Claremont Graduate University, studying American religious history. He holds an MA in Theology from Fuller Theological Seminary (2009) and BA in Philosophy from the University of California, Berkeley (2006).

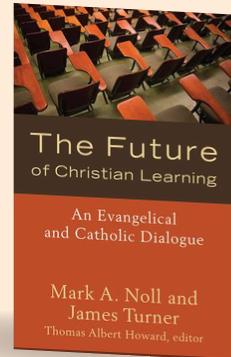
Brazos Press recently published an impressive collection of essays by evangelical historian Mark Noll and Catholic historian James Turner entitled *The Future of Christian Learning: An Evangelical and Catholic Dialogue* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2008). Since this is a journal about interfaith dialogue, it might seem odd to review an exchange between an evangelical and Catholic—in other words, an ecumenical book. After all, it is not uncommon to associate, even identify, interfaith dialogue with interreligious dialogue. But it is important to remember that interfaith dialogue can include ecumenical conversation as well, even if that is not always its primary focus. In other words, interfaith dialogue can take both an “inter-” and “intra-” form, and the Noll-Turner exchange is an example of the latter.

Thomas A. Howard, who teaches history at Gordon College and edited the volume, introduces the exchange by explaining that it began as an in-person dialogue between Noll and Turner, both of whom now teach at Notre Dame. The main subject of the dialogue is a joint exploration of the state of “Christian learning” in higher education at evangelical and Catholic colleges and universities (16). What do evangelicals and Catholics think about the nature and object of “Christian learning”? As Turner aptly puts it, “Does the adjective ‘Christian’ in the phrase ‘Christian learning’ refer to the

scholar or the scholarship?” (122). Is there a difference between evangelicals and Catholics on the subject?

Of course, Noll and Turner cannot speak for all evangelicals and Catholics, but their responses reveal something significant about how their respective scholarly traditions tend to perceive the nature of Christian learning. Turner comes down sharply on the side of scholarship: “The identifiably ‘Christian’ scholar—identifiable, that is, by her scholarly works—must have somehow been molded by Christianity but need no longer believe in it” (126). Noll, on the other hand, comes down decidedly on the side of the faith of the scholar. In fact, much of Noll’s first essay develops the idea that evangelical Christian learning ought to be dependent on conformity to theological orthodoxy—what he calls “real Christianity” (27-64). Noll writes: “Christian learning worthy of the name must be as genuinely Christian as genuinely learned. Here I take ‘real Christianity’ to mean a Trinitarian understanding of God, and also of the world as fully understandable only in relation to the Trinity” (28).

Despite methodological differences, Noll and Turner seem to appreciate the sheer value of evangelicals and Catholics conversing on a topic of shared significance. Noll even expresses “marvel” that Catholics and evangelicals are “[...] actually talking to and with each other about issues of mutual intellectual concern” (137). Noll and Turner both realize that interfaith dialogue is more than mere scholarly activity; it is an example of *fides quaerens intellectum*



(*faith seeking understanding*), which finds Biblical precedent and, for Turner, is also an embodiment of the often ecumenical tenor of the Second Vatican Council.

Even though the Noll-Turner dialogue is an example of intra-faith or ecumenical scholarship, it might also have latent implications for understanding evangelical interfaith dialogue in its interreligious form. Instead of asking Turner’s question “Does the adjective ‘Christian’ in the phrase ‘Christian learning’ refer to the scholar or the scholarship?” (122), we might ask: “Does the adjective ‘evangelical’ in the phrase ‘evangelical interfaith dialogue’ refer to the scholar or the scholarship?” If Noll’s sense of “real Christianity” is any indication, it suggests that theological orthodoxy and an evangelical commitment to the gospel are central rather than peripheral, non-negotiable rather than inessential. Yet, in the case of interreligious dialogue, this unwavering orthodoxy should not be part of a bait-and-switch evangelical agenda, lest it become inauthentic or, worse, unbiblical. Many of us hope this balance of orthodoxy and authenticity will be the future of evangelical interfaith dialogue.

particular, both the Spirit of God and the Spirit of Jesus the Christ, that pneumatology provides the kind of relational framework wherein the radical alterity—otherness—of the religions can be taken seriously even within the task of Christian theology. The result, perhaps, is the emergence of a new set of categories that may chart a new way forward.

The third aspect of Yong's definition of a pneumatological theology of religions touches on soteriological issues, which he believes provide a "different, and perhaps broader framework"⁸ for consideration, particularly in connection with ecclesiology. Yong's thesis provides us with an important and largely neglected facet in the development of a theology of religions, and one that can open up new research trajectories through a robust trinitarianism that not only involves Christological considerations, but also focuses on the work of the Spirit in creation and among human cultures and their religions.

This leads to my final consideration that supplements Kärkkäinen's discussion of theologies of religions, and that is a theology of hospitality in relation to those in other religions. Here Yong is again helpful⁹ as he builds on his pneumatological perspective, drawing upon the interconnections and important practices of exclusivist, inclusivist, and pluralist theologies of religions to create a theology of hospitality. An important aspect of this is consideration of "theology as dramatic performance,"¹⁰ wherein Christians participate in the divine drama in the unfolding scriptural narrative. Other scholars such as N. T. Wright and Nicholas Lash have argued similarly, and have suggested that Christians should enter into the process of interpreting and living out the Scriptures just as actors work out parts in a play and musicians interpret music. God has written the story that continues to unfold in history, and we are privileged to play a part. In this way theology, including theology of religions, is not merely a cognitive function, but is also a dynamic way of living the faith as part of God's unfolding narrative of the *missio Dei*.

This divine dramatic process is also one in which Christians perform their faith while engaged with other "actors" from other religious traditions. This process is then connected to a "performative pneumatological theology of religions"¹¹ that involves neighborliness and hospitality. In this context, Christians engage those of other religions as aliens and strangers, and in so doing follow the example of Jesus, who both represented and offered the eschatological hospitality of God. The incorporation of hospitality in theologies of religions will provide important aspects of engagement and humility to the theologizing process.

Kärkkäinen has provided a helpful overview of various considerations related to the development of theologies of religions, considerations that need to be related to interreligious dialogue. While these considerations are helpful, additional supplemental reflections that take into account emotional attitudes toward those of other religions, the work of the Spirit in cultures and the religions, and the importance of hospitality toward neighbors will benefit the church's doctrine and praxis in this area.

JOHN W. MOREHEAD is the director of the Western Institute for Intercultural Studies and the facilitator of the Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization's issue group on post-Christendom spiritualities. He is involved in interreligious dialogue in various contexts, including Evangelical-Mormon and Christian-Pagan. The latter can be found in Philip Johnson and Gus diZerega, *Beyond the Burning Times: A Pagan and Christian in Dialogue* (Lion, 2009), edited by John Morehead.

Endnotes

1 Terry Muck, "Interreligious Dialogue and Evangelism," *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 17 (1997): 139-51. Electronic version cited from <http://apologiagospelcom.net/mainpages/WhatsNews/Muck/MuckArt.html>, downloaded 4/19/2005 and no longer available at this URL.

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid.

4 Amos Yong, *Beyond the Impasse: Toward a Pneumatological Theology of Religions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003).

5 In addition to *Beyond the Impasse*, see Yong's discussion of this thesis in "The Spirit bears witness: pneumatology, truth, and the religions," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 57:1 (2004): 14-38.

6 *Beyond the Impasse*, 20.

7 Ibid., 21.

8 Ibid.

9 Amos Yong, *Hospitality & the Other: Pentecost, Christian Practices, and the Neighbor* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2008).

10 *Hospitality & the Other*, 54.

11 Ibid., 57.

Response: Evelyne A. Reisacher

A Timely Contribution

In his paper, my colleague Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen addresses what he calls "the most prominent challenge the Christian church faces in the beginning of the third millennium," which is the impact on daily life of "persistent plurality." The use of the word "persistent," which he borrowed from the document "Religious plurality and Christian self-understanding," is worth underlining. I am not sure all Christians living in multi-religious contexts where Christianity was historically dominant have come to terms with the fact that their society has irreversibly changed, and that they must now turn to the Bible for resources on pluralistic contexts they may have overlooked in the past.

It may seem easier for some Christians to tolerate or advocate for a plural society as long as it is not in their backyard. In other words, from their perspective, foreign religions can be given a tourist visa but should not take residency; likewise, foreign countries should all make sure they protect Christians' rights. Consider, for instance, the recent ban on the minarets in Switzerland and on full veiling in public in France and Belgium. When Islam was practiced silently behind closed doors, it did not seem to challenge churches as much as when Muslims made their faith public. Most churches in Europe have better learned to navigate the waters of secularism than those of plural religious societies.

At the same time, we should not ignore the apprehension and difficulties of those who daily share the same space with other religions. As they see other faiths around them flourish, they imagine a scenario similar to the one in

which Christianity lost ground to Islam in the Middle East or North Africa over a millennium ago. They fear the worst for their own communities. A growing number of Christians I meet in European churches are now adopting the “eye for an eye” or “tooth for a tooth” approach. They refuse to accommodate the needs of believers from other religions as long as Christians in the countries they come from are restricted from the same privileges. The prospect of successful plurality grows tainted by feelings of fear and threat.

Therefore, I believe Kärkkäinen’s paper is a timely contribution to the much-needed conversation that should take place not just in seminaries but also in every place where Christians gather to pray and read the Word of God. I would add that although there are differences

but be encouraged to put greater effort towards relationship building with people from other faiths, and adjust their attitudes when those drift away from biblical principles due to the fierceness of debates and polemics.

Kärkkäinen’s paper provides a number of good suggestions to help exclusivists, and others, to improve, if necessary, their skills in “othering,” “hospitality,” and “holistic understanding” of mission. Exclusivists will certainly welcome his exhortations to love their neighbors. But in their case, since the problem is not the neighbor so much as it is his/her religion, they should theologically explore how to manage the impact of religious differences on social relations. For example, those who believe their values are more excellent than those of other religions may have to reflect on the impact this

that theology of religions is less useful than solving daily social problems in their multi-religious contexts. Kärkkäinen’s paper, however, illustrates that it can be a great addition to whatever else is done. I would also add that it is useful as long as the theology addresses the concrete problems of believers at the grassroots level. They must gain a biblical understanding of how God sees other religions and be able to draw implications for their daily encounters with people from other faiths.

I noticed this gap between experts and laypeople when I was at the Festival of Sacred Music in Fes, Morocco, a few years ago. There were two kinds of events during the weeklong festival. One was for people with tickets who had some experience in crossing religious boundaries through art, and who

A growing number of Christians I meet ... refuse to accommodate the needs of believers from other religions ... The prospect of successful plurality grows tainted by feelings of fear and threat.

in the way plurality is managed around the world, those who have recently been exposed to it should learn from churches in places like Malaysia, Indonesia, and Lebanon, who have lived for centuries in pluralistic societies. And as Kärkkäinen points out, instead of looking only at social, cultural and political challenges, Christians must not forget the theological challenges and resources these churches have to offer.

Exclusivists, one of the three categories of Christians that Kärkkäinen describes in his paper, may find a pluralistic world a greater challenge because of the conflicts and divisions that arise from the differences they see between them and the religious Other. Does this mean that the world would be easier to share with inclusivists or pluralists? It would certainly harbor less polemics and fewer theologically fueled conflicts, and other faiths may feel more welcomed. Some readers may conclude that convincing exclusivists to abandon their views would be a quick fix for interfaith relations. I instead suggest that exclusivists be allowed to keep their convictions

has on the religious Other. Likewise, people who consider the religious Other saved only through a personal commitment to Christ must decide whether the latter are just candidates for conversion, or perhaps could become personal friends. Finally, if the neighbors of another faith do not accept Christ, are they automatically put in the category of the “forever-Other” from whom one has to stay away? Forgive my hyperbolic statements and broad generalizations. My sole intention here is to encourage mission-minded Christians, like me, to explore with greater diligence biblical resources that combine both witness and shalom in a pluralistic context.

Sometimes theologians and scholars who study people from other faiths find it easier to deal with these issues. Christian believers at the grassroots level may feel more vulnerable to the challenges of a pluralistic society because they rub shoulders with the religious other in day-to-day life, which is far different from academic exercises. Christians who live as a minority in their country or in their neighborhood may be inclined to think

listened graciously and often with much enthusiasm to music from different religions. The other was free and open to everyone and only music from one faith, in this case Islam, was played. The majority of the people at the grassroots level only attended the second event. The organizers may have been aware that without some preparation and education in interfaith relations, the process of “othering” through music cannot take place. This made me think of the local church, and how often we put high expectations on believers who fail to mix with people from other faiths in order to be salt and light. They may not be ready, like the crowds in Fes, to join the multi-religious concert; and yet, in most cases, they are forced to experience the plurality because of the transformation of our societies. How can we assist them at all levels of engagement? How can we provide them with a biblical foundation of interfaith relations?

It is not enough to equip grassroots exclusivists with information and practical tools to proclaim the gospel to people from other faiths. It is not enough to help

The Edinburgh Missionary Conference of 1910

by Matthew Krabill

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the Christian Church in the West was boundlessly optimistic and confident about the conversion of the world to Christianity. On the other hand, the Church faced tremendous challenges and crisis in its missionary lands.¹ According to historian Andrew Walls, the Edinburgh Missionary Conference of 1910 was:

a landmark in the history of mission; the starting point of the modern theology of mission; the high point of the modern Western missionary movement and the high point from which it declined; the launch-pad of the modern ecumenical movement; the point at which Christians first began to glimpse something of what a world church would be like.²

Among the eight commissions formed at the conference, two of them—Commission I and Commission IV—had “non-Christian” in the titles. But it is Commission IV that dealt most specifically with the problem of studying the presentation of the Christian message to the minds of non-Christian peoples.³ Though plagued by a Western optimism and a victorious spirit, the commission’s efforts represent one of the earliest and most serious empirical works on other faiths.

Because the dominant theology of religions at Edinburgh was “fulfillment theology,” the commission conceived of its primary task as the humble enquiry into identification of “points of contact” in non-Christian religions, using them to draw adherents of other faiths toward the full revelation of truth found in Christ.⁴ As a result, the report was structured in five sections, beginning with animistic religions, followed by Chinese religions, Japanese religions, Islam, and then Hinduism. Not coincidentally, the structure of the report assumed an implicit hierarchy of sophistication and value, with animism occupying the bottom rung and Hinduism the top.⁵

Those who were least persuaded by the

theology of fulfillment were missionaries working in Islamic and primal religious contexts. Primal religionists did not move closer to accepting Christianity by first becoming Muslims or Hindus; in fact the opposite was the case. Conversely, adherents of “higher” Vedic forms of Hinduism were not converting en masse because of their supposed elevated position on the scale of religious development.⁶ In fact it was “superstitious” Hindus of the lower castes that found the gospel message the most attractive.

One of the more significant changes during the last 100 years has been a gradual shift toward a de-territorialized understanding of Christian faith.⁷ Perhaps most important is that the center of gravity in the Christian world has shifted southward, from its Western heartlands in the U.S. and Europe to Africa, Asia, and Latin America. It should also be noted that of the 1,215 delegates at the 1910 conference, 500 were British, another 500 American, and 170 from continental Europe. There were even fewer delegates from the so-called younger churches of India, China, and Japan. There was one participant from Africa, and none from Latin America. And no one was invited from the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches. Lastly, the participants were overwhelmingly male, despite the fact that women were making a significant contribution to the missionary movement.⁸ Without a doubt, the participants at Edinburgh held a Christendom outlook that viewed the success of Christian mission as the conquest of non-Christians via the expansion of territory of the Christian nations throughout the globe.⁹

A second significant change in the past century has been the forces of globalization—including migration, urbanization, advanced technology and communication systems—which have contributed to the creation of multicultural societies characterized by religious pluralism. As such, the “non-Christian” is no longer “out-there,” but one who lives with and among us.¹⁰

As delegates from around the world meet this year for Edinburgh 2010, they are faced with different kinds of questions. Here are some to consider:

1. How do we understand mission in religiously pluralistic contexts today? And how has the concept of mission been shaped by our understanding of other religious faiths and our relationship with people of those faiths?¹¹
2. Given the fact that religious pluralism is part and parcel of the historic foundation and lived experience of many non-Western societies, what can churches in the West learn from those in the non-West about witness and dialogue? What can churches in the non-West gain from these same discussions in the West?
3. If interfaith dialogue is part of the mission of the Church, how can dialogue allow for Christians to witness to their deepest convictions, while at the same time ensure that they listen humbly and appreciatively to those of our neighbors?

Endnotes

1 Brian Stanley, *The World Missionary Conference*, Edinburgh 1910 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 2009), 16.

2 Andrew F. Walls, *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books), 53.

3 Stanley, *The World Missionary Conference*, 235. Stanley reports that a questionnaire containing eleven questions was distributed to missionaries working among non-Christians around the world, and 187 responses were received.

4 Stanley, *World Missionary Conference*, 212.

5 Stanley, *World Missionary Conference*, 213.

6 Stanley, *World Missionary Conference*, 247.

7 “Report 2 on Study Theme 2: Christian Mission Among Other Faiths,” <http://www.edinburgh2010.org/en/study-themes/2-christian-mission-among-other-faiths.html>, 39-41.

8 Dana L. Robert, *Christian Mission: How Christianity Became a World Religion* (West Sussex, UK: Blackwell, 2009), 118-119.

9 “Report 2 Theme 2,” 39.

10 “Report 2 Theme 2,” 40-45.

11 Adapted from “Report 2 Theme 2,” 55.

them understand other religions better. It is not enough to encourage them to love their neighbors. All of this must be combined with a careful monitoring of the divide that their theological views and resulting actions creates between them and the religious Other. They must be able to differentiate between the unavoidable tensions that the proclamation of the gospel generates in interfaith relations and their potential misunderstandings of God's perspective on other religions. It is here that theological reflection conducted at the grassroots level is most valuable.

Evelyne A. Reisacher is assistant professor of Islamic Studies and Intercultural Relations at Fuller Theological Seminary. Before coming to Fuller, she worked at an organization called L'Ami for 20 years, facilitating the relationship between churches and North African immigrants in France and training Christians in various parts of the world to witness cross-culturally. Reisacher assisted in securing the "Conflict Transformation: Creating Collaboration and Reducing Conflict in Muslim-Christian Relations" grant for Fuller. She was also a participant at the workshop and conference discussions of the Common Word Conference held at Yale Divinity School in 2008.

Response: Dennis Okholm

Raising Issues in the Discussion of Pluralism

INTERFAITH dialogue and the issue of pluralism are crucial today, if for no other reason than the survival of many people may depend on getting it right. So I applaud many of the points that Kärkkäinen makes in his position paper, beginning with his insistence that doctrine and theology should not be trivialized nor made the sole focus in our discussions with advocates of other faith traditions.

There is much else to appreciate in what Kärkkäinen puts forth. He acknowledges the two biblical assertions that must somehow dance with each other—that God desires all to be saved and that salvation is found only in Jesus Christ. The way in which one juxtaposes these assertions yields the three “classical” positions that Kärkkäinen enumerates: pluralism emphasizes the former asser-

tion in such a way that it compromises the latter; exclusivism (which I prefer to label “particularism”) stresses the latter assertion such that it qualifies the former; and inclusivism straddles the two assertions. Kärkkäinen seems to favor the middle option of inclusivism.

Now, all three positions can (or should) agree with Kärkkäinen's admonition that we ought to listen to the Other with patience and understanding. As Kärkkäinen insists, all three can (or should) support the right of all to preach and practice their religious faith. And all three can (or should) support the Christian attempt to evangelize with both sincere dialogue and proclamation—to engage in mission with openness and commitment, as Kärkkäinen puts it.

It would be nice if all three positions could agree with Kärkkäinen's insistence that we must allow the Other to be the Other. That is, we must not minimize or deny real differences between religions. To suggest that we are all just saying the same thing or pointing to the same reality with different cultural conceptions is pretentious and does violence to the integrity of the Other's religion. Sadly, pluralists (such as John Hick) are often guilty of such imperialism.

It seems, then, that Kärkkäinen would reject the pluralist approach and narrow our options to inclusivism and particularism, for he ultimately rejects a pluralistic theocentrism (with which he seems to begin). I applaud him when he insists on the non-negotiability of the Christian confession of Christ's full divinity and humanity and of the Incarnation, the trinitarian nature of the establishment of God's Kingdom, and the indispensable role of the church toward the Kingdom's completion. In other words, Kärkkäinen can insist that salvation belongs only to our God and that the church's role is to proclaim this to and for all, which we are to do as persuasive witnesses who speak the language of testimony. We are not to argue the case like a defense attorney, nor as judges who decide the case for the world, nor as mere reporters who try to get the facts right.

All of the above I applaud in Kärkkäin-

en's position paper. However, though I am not wholly in favor of exclusivism, Kärkkäinen's tendency to lean inclusive raises some issues for both a theology of religions and the Christian attitude toward interfaith dialogue.

First, Kärkkäinen agrees with the statement that “our theological understanding of religious plurality begins with our faith in the one God who



created all things...” While it is true that humans made in God's image possess a *sensus divinitatis*, and while it is certainly true that God is the God of all nations and peoples, God is this God through the particularity of the people of Israel and the faithful Israelite, Jesus Christ. In other words, Kärkkäinen's beginning point is not specifically Christian; that specificity comes later in his paper. It would be better to begin a Christian understanding of religious plurality not with our faith or with “the one God who created” (who could be the God of Deism, for instance), but with the faithfulness of the God who has disclosed himself in Jesus Christ. In other words, if we begin where Kärkkäinen suggests, then we might start with the wrongheaded assumption that the Deist, Muslim, and Christian are entering into the dialogue with the same conception of God. We must come to the table not merely with a faith in the Creator God, but as a people shaped by the Redeemer God through whom we rightly understand the identity of the Creator.

Second, the Christian must also come

to the table with a conviction about the noetic effects of sin (a conviction that Kärkkäinen implies he acknowledges from Romans 1). That is, we cannot be as optimistic as some are about the conception of God that is assumed to be universal. As Paul argues in Romans 1, it is not simply that people are without excuse because they have known God through creation, but rather they distort that knowledge and actually end up worshipping a conception of the creature's mind rather than the Creator. (Compare Paul's point in 2:14-16.) Does this mean that those without the special revelation of Christ and Scripture are

handful believed (v. 34), and in the rest of Acts and Paul's epistles we never hear of a church in Athens. As a result, I have never understood why we want to lift this up as an example of the way we should engage other religious perspectives by beginning with some general conception of a "god unknown" (or, as Stanley Hauerwas labels it in *Prayers Plainly Spoken*, "the god of ultimate vagueness").

In fact, Luke's account of the (literal) riot that the Christian gospel caused in Ephesus when it came into contention with another religion (the cult of Diana; see Acts 19) and Paul's reprimand of the syncretistic faith of some Colossian

interfaith dialogue not with a pluralistic theocentrism, but with an unswerving commitment to the God revealed in Jesus Christ, the allegiance to whom does not preclude genuine dialogue, but actually opens up dialogue with those with whom we differ. Such a commitment to the Christ of the Gospels actually mitigates any attitudinal exclusivism on the part of those claiming to follow a Christ who permits no smug self-righteousness, triumphalism, or indifference. The more we are committed to confessing the God revealed by the Christ of the Gospels, the more we are committed as a community to a faith that stresses service

This brings us back to the start—beginning a “theology of religions” and interfaith dialogue not with a pluralistic theocentrism, but with an unswerving commitment to the God revealed in Jesus Christ, the allegiance to whom does not preclude genuine dialogue, but actually opens up dialogue with those with whom we differ.

in a hopeless situation? Not necessarily, since a sovereign God has the prerogative of self-disclosing to whomever, whenever, and wherever God chooses. But that would seem to be the exception. In fact, taking Romans 1 seriously, it may be more likely than not that other religions tend away from rather than toward the God revealed in Jesus Christ.

This leads to a third concern I have with Kärkkäinen's "theology of religions." I am not as sure as he is that Scripture explicitly portrays "pagan saints" who know "quite a lot about God even without special revelation." For instance, Kärkkäinen appeals twice to Paul's engagement with the Areopagus in Athens as an example of how the early church dealt with the "dynamic tension between the dark picture of humanity in Romans 1 and the affirmation of the relative value of religiosity" that involves the "complex nature of the continuity and discontinuity with regard to (other) religions." Paul's approach in Acts 17 is often held up as the stellar example of a kind of interfaith dialogue in the New Testament. But I think this passage can be taken in just the opposite way—namely, as Luke's account of the meager results from the one time that Paul did not begin with the particularity of the God revealed in Israel and in Jesus Christ. Luke indicates that only a

Christians (Col 2:8-23) does not bode well for an optimistic encounter with the "pagan saints" of which Kärkkäinen believes there are "numerous biblical examples." In fact, it would be helpful if Kärkkäinen provided a parenthetical list of these examples, since I suspect most of the ones that turn out well (i.e., who end up knowing "quite a lot about God") are actually recipients of some form of special revelation.

Finally, I take issue with Kärkkäinen when he admonishes the contemporary secular mindset for confusing tolerance with the lack of commitment to any belief or opinion. He bases this on the etymology of the word "tolerance," about which he is correct. It did mean "to bear a burden" (or to bear pain or hardship), but if we took a poll, I believe we would find that that is not how the word is used or understood by our contemporaries. Instead, when folks today say we should "tolerate" each other's religious or political views, they usually mean something like this: "I'll put up with you if you'll put up with me." And that is far less than what is demanded of the Christian who is commanded to love and to be a neighbor to anyone who crosses her path.

This brings us back to the start—beginning a "theology of religions" and

to the members on society's margins, moves outward in mission, and respects the freedom of the Other to reject our proclamation, just as Christ's opponents were free to crucify him.

Dennis Okholm has an MDiv and an MA (Church History) from Trinity Evangelical Divinity School and a ThM and PhD in Systematic Theology from Princeton Theological Seminary. He is a professor of theology at Azusa Pacific University (Azusa, CA) and is also on the pastoral staff of St. Andrews Presbyterian Church (Newport Beach). He has participated in several interfaith discussions over the years, and in the past two years he has been involved in dialogue with academic peers in the Mormon church.

Response: Robert S. Covolo

Making the Difficult Simple

ELI-MATTI Kärkkäinen is a leading expert who demonstrates a broad understanding of the various theologies of religion and has judiciously provided a user-friendly introduction for a very difficult field. As such, his essay has a deceptively simple quality. In what follows, I shall tease out the complexities behind two of his points, complexities of which Kärkkäinen is well aware. This, in turn, will further display his contribution behind his carefully outlined introduction to the field.

Kärkkäinen's appeal to the categories of exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism is not without awareness of their limitations. He has stated elsewhere that while such categories serve pedagogical purposes, they are problematic in that they reduce a theology of religions to a purely soteriological focus, ignoring other important and equally relevant issues.¹ Kärkkäinen is equally aware that these terms can at times be pejorative and misleading, particularly when it comes to classifying contemporary theologians of religions (Kärkkäinen, 166). Gavin D'Costa and Amos Yong are two contemporary theologians in the field who would eschew the characterizations of the complexity of their approach through these categories.² As missiologists have noted, our very approach to these (and all theoretical) categories is never culturally neutral, and therefore we must not appropriate them in a way that ignores the philosophical and cultural implications behind them.

Paul Hiebert's classic discussion of bounded sets highlights this concept.³ As he points out, we must not simply assume categories are bounded sets. Although such an approach serves the purpose of maintaining clear distinctions between groups, it equally blinds us to the complex and unique movements intrinsic to each item within such groupings. Hiebert would also warn that although we might want to backload these categories with theoretical assumptions about how they can operate, the discipline of the theology of religions can never be reduced to simply applying static (bounded) theoretical containers in which to put the various approaches, religions, theologians, etc. The implications for such an approach, particularly as played out in applying a theology of religions to interfaith work, would be fraught with reductions and characterizations.

Although Kärkkäinen is fully aware of the limitations within these categories, he is still right to begin with them. First, as an evangelical, he is deeply concerned with the *euangelion* and, therefore, can never discard the centrality of the soteriological focus that these categories emphasize. More so, as Kärkkäinen notes, these categories are to be seen as

a way to organize the approaches to the broader issue of the "dynamic tension" in the scriptural witness regarding other religions. Moreover, beginning with these categories allows him to retrace the movement of the discipline of theology of religions itself. Where early discussions centered almost purely on these categories, the relatively fledgling field has broadened beyond these issues and gone on to include thinking about the religions through explicitly theological categories (Christological, pneumatological, trinitarian, etc.).

A second commendable point is Kärkkäinen's insistence that we keep a strong trinitarian criteria—not only for being faithful to the Christian claim, but also for the purpose of avoiding abuses that inevitably center on one theological loci in separation from the others. Yet once again we should not be fooled. For as Kärkkäinen has demonstrated at length elsewhere, invoking a trinitarian approach to the theology of religions is no panacea.⁴ Not only can one find trinitarian approaches that fit all three aforementioned categories (exclusivism, inclusivism, pluralism), one likewise finds a vast disagreement between the different approaches. Theological projects as diverse as that of Barth, Rahner, and Hick all claim a trinitarian basis, yet could be seen to fall into the respective exclusivist, inclusivist, and pluralist camps. Likewise, uniquely distinct projects such as those of Pannenberg, Pinnock, D'Costa, and Dupuis could all be labeled an inclusivist trinitarian approach, although they disagree with each other on significant points. This shows how important it is that one carefully unpack the logic built into the particular appropriation of a trinitarian framework, which is something Kärkkäinen has done at length in previous scholarship.

One of the most important issues for just such an approach involves one's understanding of Augustine's rule of thumb—that the external works of the Trinity are undivided (*opera Trinitatis ad extra sunt indivisa*). Does one take, as Robert Jensen does, a more Cappadocian view of a perfect mutuality in each member's undividedness, thus each equally exercising its distinct mode of

agency (Father initiating, Son actualizing, Spirit perfecting) within every act?⁵ Or does one allow for a reading of Augustine's rule that understands (*ad extra*) the distinct work of one member as inhering with the others without concern for a distinct mode of agency? These alternative readings play into how one recognizes and develops the place Christology or pneumatology might play within a trinitarian theology of religions.

These difficulties are not meant to undermine Kärkkäinen's statement of the value of a trinitarian approach, but to underscore the need for more work in synthesizing a uniquely trinitarian and evangelical theology of religions. Kärkkäinen is well aware of the need for such a synthesis, stating elsewhere his desire someday to attempt his own trinitarian theology of religions.⁶ Until then, Kärkkäinen is correct in his assertion that one can still appeal to the importance of a trinitarian rubric in order to guard against abuses. After all, creedal statements receive the most immediate traction when used to identify the limits of orthodoxy. It is an entirely different chore to construct a detailed and definitive statement that resolves the boundaries of creedal statements into a definitive whole. Thus, we see Kärkkäinen's wisdom in focusing his comments on a trinitarian criteria for a truly Christian theology of religions.

Robert S. Covolo is a PhD candidate studying theology and culture at Fuller Theological Seminary. He is a licensed minister with the Grace Brethren Fellowship and has served as an adjunct professor in theology and New Testament at Talbot School of Theology.

Endnotes

- 1 Kärkkäinen, *An Introduction to the Theology of Religions*, 165.
- 2 Gavin D'Costa, *Christianity and the World Religions*, 34; Amos Yong, *Beyond the Impasse*, 27.
- 3 Paul Hiebert, *Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues*, III ff.)
- 4 Kärkkäinen, *Trinity and Religious Pluralism*, 2004.
- 5 Jensen, *Systematic Theology: The Triune God*, 110–III.
- 6 Kärkkäinen, *Trinity and Religious Pluralism*, 164.

Founded in 1971, the InterSem experience provides opportunities for Jewish and Christian seminarians to build relationships by engaging in dialogue designed to increase understanding and appreciation among the participants.



Praxis: Jennifer Rosner

Intersem 2010: Strange Rituals

In an article entitled “Salvation is from the Jews,” the late Richard John Neuhaus wrote the following with regard to Jewish-Christian dialogue: “I suggest that we would not be wrong to believe that this dialogue, so closely linked to the American experience, is an essential part of the unfolding of the story of the world.” The rivalrous and troubled tale of these two religions has been a constant thread in the history of the West, and the need for dialogue and mutual understanding is as urgent as it has ever been. The tumultuous events of the twentieth century have yielded a new chapter in the relationship between Christians and Jews, one that holds great promise for healing, reconciliation, and redemptive partnership.

As an institution committed to cultural engagement and a global approach to education and spiritual formation, Fuller Seminary places a premium on interfaith dialogue. Since 1971, Intersem has been one of the rich opportunities afforded to Fuller students to engage in deep dialogue and meaningful relationship with Jewish (and Catholic) seminarians.

In my three years of attending and serving on the Intersem planning committee, I have grown and been challenged in ways that will continue to profoundly shape me as a person and religious leader. Two particular moments from this most recent Intersem retreat are etched into my mind as poignant instances of vulnerable encounter with the religious Other.

The first of these experiences came during the Protestant worship service. As the celebrants were serving communion, an invitation was extended to the Jewish and Catholic participants to come forward to receive a blessing—in this case, the priestly blessing of Numbers 6:24-26. My eyes filled with tears as I watched my Jewish seminarian friends reach the front of the line. The Protestant celebrants laid hands on them and recited the blessing that holds such great significance in the Jewish tradition. “May the Lord bless you and keep you; may the Lord make his face shine upon you and be gracious unto you; may the Lord lift up his face onto you and give you peace.” It seemed as though this loving invocation of divine favor alone could undo in part the mutual acts of discord that litter the Judeo-Christian past. In that moment, the words of 1 Peter 4:8 were powerfully actualized, for love indeed covered over a multitude of sins.

The second significant experience came during the final dialogue session. My dialogue group was discussing the role of the Torah scroll in Jewish worship services and the Eucharist in Catholic worship services. Members of the group were commenting on how both the Torah and the host are deeply revered sacred objects, and how the elevation of the object serves as a climactic moment within the worship service. This alone was an important moment of connection and mutual understanding, but the conversation went one step deeper as we realized together the underlying relationship between the Torah scroll and the host.

For Jews, the Torah is the living word through which God has revealed the pattern of faithful living to the people of Israel. As the Torah is placed back into the ark, Jews recite the words of Proverbs 3: “It is a tree of life to those who embrace it; those who lay hold of it will be blessed. All its ways are pleasant ways and its paths are paths of peace.” Jesus too was the living Word of God, and through his incarnation Christians experience the full revelation of God in the world. The Torah scroll and the host function similarly because fundamentally they represent the same thing. Jesus, whose body is mysteriously present in the host, is the living Torah. As we made this connection, I was reminded of the words of Jewish New Testament scholar Amy Jill Levine: “For far too long Jesus has been the wedge that drives Christians and Jews apart. I suggest that we can also see him as a bridge between us.” In this particular case, Jesus was indeed a bridge.

According to Diana Eck, one cannot ever fully understand their own religion until they have studied the religion of others. May we embody this truth as we prepare for lives of service in the religious world.



Jen Rosner is a PhD student at Fuller Theological Seminary and adjunct professor at Azusa Pacific University and Messianic Jewish Theological Institute. Her dissertation focuses on twentieth-century developments in the relationship between Judaism and Christianity and is tentatively titled “Healing the Schism: Barth, Rosenzweig and the New Jewish-Christian Encounter.” Her scholarship stems from her own journey of seeking authentic expression for her faith in Yeshua (Jesus) in the context of the Judaism with which she was raised.