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Amos Yong

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## Whither Theological Inclusivism? The Development and Critique of an Evangelical Theology of Religions

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*The second of our two articles is by Dr Amos Yong who has recently completed his doctoral studies at Boston University and is now teaching at Bethel College, St Paul.*

**Key words:** Theology; religion; inclusivism; Pinnock.

### Introduction

The question of the religions has become in the past decade a live one within evangelicalism. This debate can best be characterized as that between the *exclusivists* and the *inclusivists*. The exclusivists, in accord with traditional evangelical thinking on the subject, have generally followed Calvin, Edwards, and the Princeton theologians in denying that the unevangelized 'including all adherents of non-Christian religions' have much hope of salvation. Its advocates have insisted on the particularity of salvation as confession of Jesus Christ, and thus on the importance of missionary and evangelistic proclamation of the Gospel. The inclusivists, however, have retrieved from such figures as Wesley and C. S. Lewis a less stringent approach regarding the salvation of those who have never heard the gospel. The recent efforts of Norman Anderson, John Sanders, Stanley Grenz, and the more extensive contributions of Clark Pinnock have focused on the argument that salvation, while founded upon and made available only in Christ, is universally accessible to all, including those adherents of non-Christian religions who have no knowledge of the gospel.<sup>1</sup>

While there are many facets to this debate, the focus has been on the question of which approach is more faithful to Scripture. While

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1 There are many stripes of inclusivists and exclusivists, as well as pluralists or relativists who generally hold to the 'all roads lead to Rome' theory of religion. To simplify matters and to be consistent, I will retain the use of exclusivism and traditionalism and their cognates throughout this essay to refer to the more conservative evangelicals who object to theological inclusivism by espousing the position that salvation comes only through faith engendered by the hearing of the Gospel.

advocates of inclusivism have recognized that their argument needs to pass muster biblically in order for the evangelical community to even seriously consider its merits, exclusivist critics remain unconvinced. At the same time, however, exclusivists have also raised other concerns about the inclusivist project regarding practical, ecclesial, and missiological issues: how does theological inclusivism work in the real world of the religions? Does moving from exclusivism to inclusivism demand a re-evaluation of the notion of religion itself, conceiving it not so much as the failed human enterprise to know God or as of demonic origin, but rather as the possible mediator of truth and salvation within the broader scope of divine salvation history? In opening the door to the possibility that the religions are mediators of truth, goodness, and even salvation, the foundational anxiety may be exposed: how are such to be discerned? Would it be possible to discern the Holy Spirit from other spirits, the true from the false, the good from the bad, salvation from damnation in the religions? In the light of these issues, it may well be that underneath the concern for biblical accuracy lie even more difficult and troubling issues related to the discernment of the religions.

My thesis is that the biblical, historical, and systematic foundations of an inclusivistic theology of religions, no matter how rigorously constructed, will always be less than plausible to traditionalists if inclusivists fail to test their claims or make provision for the testing of their claims against the empirical reality of the historical religions. One of the controlling questions of this essay is whether or not it is the lack of either a comparative methodology or a proper criteriology (or both) enabling discernment of falsehood, the demonic, and the idolatrous which renders theological inclusivism suspect to the traditionalists. To get at this problem, I propose a review of the work of Clark Pinnock, who has been evangelical inclusivism's most ardent and persuasive recent advocate. Part of the burden of this paper will be to show that the inclusivists have labored exegetically and theologically to make their case for inclusivism, and to that extent, the primary objective in section one will be to delineate the development of Pinnock's theology. Yet, I will also argue that inclusivists have in the process paid insufficient attention to the corollary questions of discernment. In section two, I will show that when applied to the religions, Pinnock's argument that the Spirit is at work in the non-Christian faiths raises many unanswered questions which have not escaped the exclusivist critique. Because my own inclinations are toward inclusivism, I write more as an 'inside' critic than an 'outside' polemicist. My purpose is to nudge inclusivism forward, from abstract theological theory to more concrete empirical analysis.

## I. Pinnock and the Development of Theological Inclusivism

Not many evangelical theologians have given the kind of sustained systematic reflection to the question of the salvation of persons in the non-Christian religions as has Clark Pinnock over the last decade.<sup>2</sup> Reviewing the growth of his inclusivistic theology of religions will allow an assessment of its strengths and weaknesses. His accomplishments demonstrate his evangelical commitment to Scripture and his systematic argumentation in laying out a comprehensive theological vision of inclusivism. Yet they also reveal the deep ambiguities which give exclusivist critics pause for concern. I will examine his writings on salvation and the non-Christian religions in terms of two stages of development: 1) the earlier systematic presentation culminating in *A Wideness in God's Mercy*, and 2) the more prominent pneumatological approach in his recent works. Throughout, I want to query Pinnock about whether his inclusivism is equipped to make discerning judgments about the religions and how that is to be done.

### *Elements of an inclusivistic system*

Throughout his career, it has been precisely Pinnock's willingness to attend to the human condition that has motivated him to reassess traditional evangelical thinking of soteriology, first regarding the salvation of Christians, and then later of those in other religious traditions who have never heard the Gospel. In an essay written in 1988, he confesses that he was led to re-examine the question of the religions because of his concern to relate scriptural truth to the emerging global religious consciousness. Recognizing this problem as a 'first class hermeneutical challenge', Pinnock noted the following tension posed by the modern realization of religious pluralism:

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2 Representative are: 'The Finality of Jesus Christ in a World of Religions', *Christian Faith and Practice in the Modern World: Theology from an Evangelical Point of View*, eds. Mark A. Noll and David F. Wells (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 152-68; 'Toward an Evangelical Theology of Religions', *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 33:3 (1990), 359-68; Acts 4:12 'No Other Name Under Heaven', *Through No Fault of Their Own: The Fate of Those Who Have Never Heard*, eds. William V. Crockett and James G. Sigountos (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991), 107-16; *A Wideness in God's Mercy: The Finality of Jesus Christ in a World of Religions* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992); 'Evangelism and Other Living Faiths: An Evangelical Charismatic Perspective', *All Together in One Place: Theological Papers from the Brighton Conference on World Evangelism*, eds. Peter Hocken and Harold D. Hunter (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 208-18; 'An Inclusivist View', *More Than One Way? Four Views of Salvation in a Pluralistic World*, eds. Dennis L. Okholm and Timothy R. Phillips (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 93-148; *Flame of Love: A Theology of the Holy Spirit* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1996), especially chap. 7: 'Spirit & Universality.'

On the one hand, there is the strong desire to affirm in no uncertain terms the uniqueness and finality of Jesus Christ and to regard as heretical any attempt to reduce or water down this conviction. On the other hand, there is the belief in God's universal salvific will and feelings welling up from within that God is not one to cast off millions who through no fault of their own lacked an opportunity to embrace Christ's salvation. How shall I correlate in my own mind the demands that come from my Christian tradition and my experience of life in the eighties?<sup>3</sup>

A follow-up article two years later both clarifies and extends the initial proposal.<sup>4</sup> In this piece, Pinnock sets forth an evangelical theology of religions as founded on the two axioms previously discussed, although appropriately fine tuned at this stage: the universal and global reach of God's salvation, and the particular salvation through Jesus Christ. Whereas the first axiom is calculated to combat the soteriological exclusivism of the traditional *extra ecclesia nulla salus* position ('no salvation outside the church'), the second opposes the theological relativism of pluralists such as John Hick and Paul Knitter.<sup>5</sup>

With these two central axioms in hand, Pinnock proceeds to outline a theology of religions. First, the religions should be assessed as structures of human life analogous to cultural or political systems, all of which are marked by the tension of historical reality awaiting eschatological consummation. Because the religions exist within the scope of God's providence, they are therefore an expression of the presence and activity of divine grace. Pinnock thus understands the approach of Paul at Mars Hill (Acts 17:16-34) to be a dialectical and well-balanced one, worthy of emulation. At the same time, even if the religions are not, as the early Barth insisted, unbelief as such, yet Pinnock recognizes that they 'may sometimes be unbelief or even worse.'<sup>6</sup> They are therefore a mixed bag, containing both good that can be appreciated and evil that needs to be discerned and confronted. Pinnock does not, however, within the scope of this essay, attempt to deal with the question of how such discernment is to occur, outside of saying that 'only as they [the religions] claim ultimacy for themselves are they demonic'; yet, he does hint that the task is an arduous one: 'there can be no *a priori* in this area, no shortcuts to dialogue and to discernment through the Spirit.

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3 Pinnock, 'The Finality of Jesus Christ', 152-53.

4 Pinnock, 'Toward an Evangelical Theology of Religions.'

5 See John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1989), and Paul F. Knitter, *No Other Name? A Critical Survey of Christian Attitudes Toward the World Religions* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1985), 171-204.

6 Pinnock, 'Toward an Evangelical Theology of Religions', 365.

We do not know what we may find when we encounter other faiths, whether good or ill. This can even be true with Christian faith.<sup>7</sup>

However, even if religions may be historically ambiguous, yet they are also dynamic changing realities that are open to the process of eschatological transformation by Christ. As historical realities, the religions 'are all being affected by the Spirit who is moving everything toward consummation.'<sup>8</sup> Pinnock is wary that he might be misunderstood as predicting too rosy a picture; yet because God has provided salvation in Jesus Christ, he believes that there is good reason for cautious optimism, which in turn calls for a greater exercise of responsibility on the part of the Church. Rather than just thinking that all things will work out in the end, 'Christianity is in a situation of conflict and contest with competitive religious truth claims. This means dialogue at the round table and engagement on all fronts. It means rational contests and spiritual encounters (like Acts 17:2-4 and 19:17). We are pluralists and not relativists, and therefore we want to engage the various truth claims openly and hopefully.'<sup>9</sup>

The sketch of Pinnock's inclusive theology of religions in his early articles received more extensive treatment and systematic elaboration in *A Wideness in God's Mercy*. Pinnock begins with the axiom of God's universal salvific will by outlining a 'hermeneutic of hopefulness.' This he finds established in the OT, disclosed first in the global covenants of Gn. 1-11, and then in God's concerns for the nations as expressed in the OT prophets. He then discerns an extension of this hermeneutic in the NT. This 'wider hope' is central to Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom of God, highlighted in the epistolary discussions of universal atonement, integral to the doctrine of recapitulation based on the resurrection of Jesus, and evident throughout the eschatological images of the Apocalypse. He concludes that 'salvation is going to be extensive in number and comprehensive in scope. The Bible itself closes with an eloquently portrayed optimism of salvation, including the renewal of all things and the salvation of all peoples.'<sup>10</sup>

7 *Ibid.*, 364-65.

8 *Ibid.*, 367.

9 *Ibid.*, 366. Pinnock is here contrasting his own 'pluralism' with that of the self-avowed pluralists. The latter's 'pluralism' which ignores the deep-seated differences between the religions is actually more akin to 'relativism.' Pinnock, on the other hand, does not want to overlook fundamental and distinguishing features of the various religions and therefore considers his own model to be, in fact, more 'pluralistic' than those in company with Hick and Knitter. To be fair, more recently, pluralists have taken heed to criticisms of their relativism and made adjustments so as not to simplistically overlook differences between the religions (e.g. Paul F. Knitter, *One Earth Many Religions: Multifaith Dialogue and Global Responsibility* [Maryknoll: Orbis, 1995], 38-53).

10 Pinnock, *Wideness*, 35.

In defense of the second axiom, 'the particularity of Christian salvation', Pinnock asserts that the NT evidence necessitates a normative christology so that even if one were to attempt to reinterpret the doctrine of the incarnation, one would nevertheless still have to deal with the finality of Christ. That being said, however, he insists that there are both logical/epistemological and theological reasons why a high christology does not entail a narrowness of salvation. With regard to the former, Pinnock follows the Second Vatican Council in distinguishing between 'the ontological necessity of Christ's work of redemption from the epistemological situation of sinners.'<sup>11</sup> Regarding the latter, Pinnock insists on the inseparability of christology from the doctrine of the triune God and God's prevenient grace. Briefly stated, Christians confess God the Father Almighty, the creator of the world, in whom 'we live and move and have our being' (Acts 17:28). The confession of Christ is simply the recognition that in the man Jesus, God has definitively revealed Godself; at the same time, the Logos who became flesh in the historical Jesus is 'present in the entire world and in the whole of human history;' finally, the Spirit is confessed as 'the mysterious presence, the breath and vitality of God in the world.'<sup>12</sup> Pinnock considers following the Eastern churches in rejecting the *filioque* as an important move for a contemporary theology of religions. In an important passage which prefigures the direction to come, he observes that

according to the Eastern view, the Spirit is not tied to the Christ-event exclusively but rather can operate in the whole world, which is the Father's domain. This provides another way of thinking about God being active in the world at large. God is active by his Spirit in the structures of creation, in the whole of history, even in the sphere of the religions. The breath of God is free to blow wherever it wills (Jn 3:8). The economy of the Spirit is not under our control, and certainly it is not limited to the church. There is no hint of the grace of God being limited to a single thread of human history.<sup>13</sup>

He concludes that the particularity axiom founded on a trinitarian christology goes hand in hand with the universality of the divine salvific will.<sup>14</sup>

11 *Wideness*, 75. Pinnock generally feels that Vatican II did the right thing in repudiating the doctrine of *extra ecclesia nulla salus*, but he asserts that post-conciliar Catholic theologians have gone too far in seeing that which is good, holy, and true in the historical religions without discerning their darker side.

12 Pinnock, *Wideness*, 77, 78.

13 *Ibid.*, 78.

14 Space considerations preclude any extensive treatment of Pinnock's discussion of the historical response of the Church to religious plurality. Suffice it to say that in re-surveying the history of Christian thought, Pinnock finds an optimism of salvation supported by patristic fathers such as Irenaeus, Justin Martyr, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Theophilus of Antioch and Athenagoras. John Sanders adds substantially to this list in his *No Other Name: An Investigation into the Destiny of the Unevangelized* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 267-80.

Pinnock realizes, however, that the two central axioms serve only to lay a soteriological foundation for the salvation of the unevangelized and that a great deal more work needs to be done on the religions themselves in order for a theology of religions to emerge. What is now needed is a biblical and phenomenological investigation of religion. Appropriately, he pauses to define *religion*, and does so by distinguishing between its subjective and objective aspects, adopting, in some instances, the language of *faith* and the *cumulative traditions* first utilized by the historian of religion, W. C. Smith.<sup>15</sup> Whereas the cumulative traditions are the institutions, teachings, rituals, symbols, and the like, which constitute the historical religions, faith is that personal response with which one relates to what is considered the ultimate religious object. The Bible, Pinnock proffers, is concerned primarily with religion in the subjective sense as the proper heart response to God.

In surveying Scripture on the objective aspects of religion, Pinnock is surprised by the biblical data. To be sure, false religion is exposed by the biblical writers, whether it be Canaanite or Israelite idolatry, Jewish religious hypocrisy, or the corrupted religious practices confronted by the early Christians. The Bible is clear that 'religion may be dark, deceptive, and cruel. It harbors ugliness, pride, error, hypocrisy, darkness, cruelty, demons, hardheartedness, blindness, fanaticism, and deception. The idea that world religions ordinarily function as paths to salvation is dangerous nonsense and wishful thinking.'<sup>16</sup> Yet Pinnock also finds in Scripture forms of noble religion and religiousness outside the traditionally demarcated history-of-salvation lines. Drawing from the 'holy pagan tradition' in Scripture, he mentions numerous believing men and women, including Abel, Enoch, Noah, Job, Daniel (from Ezk. 14:14, not to be confused with the biblical author), Melchizedek, Lot, Abimelech, Jethro, Rahab, Ruth, Naaman, the Queen of Sheba, the Magi from the East, Cornelius, and others, 'who enjoyed a right relationship with God and lived saintly lives, under the terms of the wider covenant God made with Noah.'<sup>17</sup> In many of these instances, the relationship of these 'pagan saints' was mediated to God by means of their own local religious customs and practices. This can be explained either anthropologically or theologically. On the one hand, the openness of the human spirit to God allows the development

15 Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion* (New York: Macmillan, 1962).

16 Pinnock, *Wideness*, 90. For this and other reasons, Pinnock forthrightly rejects as 'naïve speculation' Rahner's theory that the historical religions are the divinely appointed socio-cultural means by which God has always been sought and found (*ibid.*, 91).

17 *Ibid.*, 92; Pinnock acknowledges here his dependence on Jean Daniélou, *Holy Pagans of the Old Testament* (London: Longmans, Green, 1957).



of the religions out of human aspirations; on the other hand, the non-Christian religions can be understood in some sense to reflect both general revelation and the prevenient grace of the triune God.

The question of general revelation, however, does not receive adequate treatment in *Wideness*. Pinnock argues later that the 'faith principle' of Heb. 11 is what makes salvation universally accessible. Along with the patristic fathers mentioned earlier, he cites others such as Uldrich Zwingli, A. H. Strong, and the contemporary evangelical apologist, Stuart Hackett, in support of the argument that all who are saved 'from OT and intertestamental individuals, to the unevangelized who are judged on the basis of their works (Mt. 25:40, Acts 10:34-35), to babies who die in infancy and the mentally handicapped' are accepted because of their faith response to God.<sup>18</sup> Yet, nowhere does Pinnock explicate the notion or the content of general revelation.

For Pinnock, then, the biblical evidence not only allows that 'religious experience may be valid outside Judaism and Christianity', but also that 'there are positive features in other religions due to God's presence and revelation.'<sup>19</sup> He concludes that there is a *via media* that avoids Barth's blanket chastisement of the religions and Rahner's rosy-eyed optimism, but that it is a path which requires discernment to determine whether truth or falsity is at work, whether any individual is exercising subjective faith in God or remains under fleshly or demonic delusions, or whether the cumulative tradition (objective religion) helps or hinders personal faith. The import of discernment thus appears:

Spiritual discernment in the context of the believing community is what is critical in these areas. As John says, 'Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world' (1 Jn 4:1). There must be a testing in the Spirit, a weighing of all utterances. The spiritually gifted need to judge whether a person is moving in the direction of faith or not. Is the will of the Lord being heard and done here? Is God at work here, or is this another spirit? Such questions cannot be answered on the basis of reason or exegesis alone. The community taught by God through the Spirit must exercise critical judgment in the realm of prophecy and all other such matters.<sup>20</sup>

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18 Hackett's laconic remarks oppose the traditional evangelical understanding of general revelation as having only the negative function of ensuring the damnation of sinners; see Stuart C. Hackett, *The Reconstruction of the Christian Revelation Claim* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984).

19 Pinnock, *Wideness*, 94, 106.

20 *Ibid.*, 110.

This is an important admonition. Yet, it is, at the same time, fraught with difficulties. Rather than retreating into the safe haven of Christian orthodoxy, for Pinnock the call to dialogue and confrontation is all the more urgent in this situation. Because the religions are a mixture of good and bad, truth and falsity, the divine and the demonic, they should be continually confronted by the gospel in a variety of encounters. On the one hand there is the encounter between the Holy Spirit and the demonic resulting in the gradual transformation of the religions (Pinnock cites as instances the triumph over Canaanite religion by the worshippers of YHWH, and the demise of the quasi-religion, Marxism). On the other hand, there is the interchange of ideas in dialogue and in the intense competition of intellectual life. The question, however, persists: how are conflicting truth claims to be adjudicated? He does urge an inclusivistic theology of religions on to participation in the interreligious dialogue, which includes: 1) the willingness to listen to and appreciate other religions; 2) to live and think globally rather than parochially; and 3) to exchange critical questions about truth claims. From this, Pinnock envisions the transformation of both persons and cumulative traditions as the Holy Spirit works to bring about recognition of the gospel. However, there is not much suggested as to how this transformation comes about, or how conflicting truth claims are to be decided. Although he eschews both relativism and fideism since neither position enables the quest for truth, yet he goes so far as to admit that 'truth will be resolved eschatologically. This means we will never fully resolve the conversation but patiently await the arrival of full knowledge from God.'<sup>21</sup>

The book ends with a consideration of the implications of inclusivism for missions. Given Pinnock's argument that God desires to save everyone, that Christ's life, death and resurrection have ontic rather than epistemic implications for soteriology, that the unevangelized are saved by their faith response to general revelation, and that the cumulative traditions are providentially ordained by God with a role to play in the eschatological formation of the kingdom, the motivation for missions, while not completely detached from the very real threat of judgment and damnation, is no longer to be driven by the pessimistic 'fewness' doctrine. Rather, as reconstructed by

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21 Ibid., 146. This admission, along with his caution against sole reliance on reason and exegesis in discerning truth claims (see previous quote), is bound to be troubling for conservative evangelicals, especially those aligned with the Princeton theology. Pinnock's bold embrace of the contingencies of history and a non-foundationalist epistemology is unlikely to win over many from the traditionalist camp. See his earlier defense of a narrative approach to theology in *Tracking the Maze: Finding Our Way Through Modern Theology from an Evangelical Perspective* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1990), 153-87.

Pinnock, Christian motives for missions need to move away from the pronouncement of the escape of wrath and terror to the announcement of the *evangelion*, from impending hellfire and damnation to the dawning of the kingdom of God, from solely proclamation and evangelism to a multiplicity of activities including dialogue and Christian service. There is, after all, 'a wideness in God's mercy' which extends even to those who have not heard.

*A Pneumatological approach to the religions*

With the appearance of *A Wideness in God's Mercy*, an inclusivistic option was made available to evangelicals which did not sacrifice convictions about biblical authority or a high christology.<sup>22</sup> Yet the last word has by no means been uttered. The nagging questions that remain, along with the inevitable resistance set forth by evangelical exclusivists, demand that proponents of inclusivism continue to refine and if possible develop their own proposal. The direction for possible development, however, had already been hinted at in *Wideness* in the suggestion that an inclusivistic doctrine of Christ must necessarily be a trinitarian christology. This required, therefore, not only an overall doctrine of God, but also an equally robust doctrine of the Holy Spirit. Since *Wideness* was focused on christology and not pneumatology, not much was said about the Spirit. Yet what little was said would prove to be integral to the theology of religions. Pinnock had already seen that within the trinitarian framework,

God the Spirit also [along with the Son] proceeds from the Father and is present in the whole world. God's breath flows in the world at large, not just within the confines of Christian movements. The Spirit of Jesus is at the same time a cosmic force hovering over the waters and giving life to every creature (Ge 1:2; Ps 104:30). The Spirit is the overflow of God's love. We see his activity in human culture and even in the religions of the humanity. The doctrine of the Trinity means that God, far from being difficult to locate in the world, can be encountered everywhere in it. One needs to take pains and be very adept at hiding *not* to encounter God.<sup>23</sup>

Questions, however, remain. If indeed the Spirit is both present and at work on a cosmic scale, is not the urgency of missions then undermined? Does not the doctrine of the Spirit's universality have eschatological implications? And, of course, the underlying question

22 John Sander's *No Other Name* also appeared in 1992. He added to the inclusivistic argument in two ways: first, by contrasting inclusivism with the two other models (exclusivism or restrictivism, and pluralism or universalism); second, with more thorough excursions into historical theology to establish its evangelical lineage.

23 Pinnock, *Wideness*, 104, italics his.

of discerning the Spirit becomes all the more important in this context.

Perhaps in part for these reasons, Pinnock chose to advance by focusing on the topic of an evangelical-charismatic approach to missions and the religions in his contribution to an international conference on world evangelism.<sup>24</sup> In this short paper, Pinnock builds on Pope John Paul II's major encyclical *Redemptoris Missio* (1990) to add to the argument for global missions and evangelization from the standpoint of the charismatic experience of Pentecost. He emphasizes that because the Spirit is at work in the world 'creating a profounder grasp of who the God revealed in Jesus Christ is, the Spirit is thus present before any evangelist arrives and prepares the world for Jesus to come. The experience of Pentecost accentuates this confidence in the Spirit's freedom and kindles a desire in us to meet the Spirit wherever it has gone among men and women.'<sup>25</sup> This reinforces conclusions in Wideness regarding 'pagan saints' and the necessity for both evangelism and dialogue. Here, the charismatic-Pentecostal experience of the Spirit 'intensifies our capacity to believe and hope all things for these pagans who love God and are loved by him,' and 'encourages dialogue by creating greater love in us for others and quickening faith in us about the possibilities of God's grace at work in their lives.'<sup>26</sup>

What appears to be at work at the foundations of Pinnock's inclusivism is a shift from an emphasis on christology to a trinitarian pneumatology. This shift is more evident in his contribution to a round-table discussion with representatives of pluralism and exclusivism published in the volume *More Than One Way? Four Views on Salvation in a Pluralistic World*. In this essay, the exclusion of the *filioque* is here taken for granted, and Pinnock forthrightly admits that 'the Holy Spirit plays a prominent role in my understanding of inclusivism.'<sup>27</sup> The economy of the Spirit in the world is understood not as completely disconnected but rather as identifiably distinct from that of the Son. Pinnock locates the weakness of traditional pneumatology

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24 Pinnock, 'Evangelism and Other Living Faiths.'

25 *Ibid.*, 211.

26 *Ibid.*, 212.

27 Pinnock, 'An Inclusivist View', 106. Briefly, the import of this perennial doctrinal problem restated in this context is this: if the Spirit is from the Father *and* or *through* the Son, it makes sense to think of the domain of the Spirit more as circumscribed by the Church than not. If, however, on the proposed alternative reading which is being increasingly accepted by a wide spectrum of theologians, the Spirit is from the Father of the Son, then the economy of the Son in no way limits that of the Spirit (cf. *Spirit of God, Spirit of Christ: Ecumenical Reflections on the Filioque Controversy*, ed. Lukas Vischer [Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1981]). Pinnock's inclusivistic theology of religions takes advantage of the latitude that is granted by the gradually emerging consensus to remove the *filioque*.

as being almost exclusively bound to ecclesiology. He chides evangelicals for having 'stressed so strongly the Spirit's role in bringing people to faith in Christ that we have neglected the salvific presence of the Spirit in humanity's search for meaning generally.'<sup>28</sup> Thus there is a restoration of the link between creation and redemption since the Spirit is active in both arenas.

As always, Pinnock is careful to admonish that this move by no means implies that the religions are vehicles of salvation. The Spirit, after all, 'is the power of God unto salvation, not to religion.'<sup>29</sup> Because of this, discernment is imperative. And because the Spirit is both the Spirit of God and the Spirit of Jesus, the primary (if not only) Christian criterion for the discernment of the Spirit is christological. In an important paragraph, Pinnock writes:

Christians must not believe every prophet or go with every flow, because not every spirit has a valid claim to be heard. As omnipresent, the Spirit is in everything but not as everything. Certainly God is present outside the symbolic world of Christianity, and his life-giving activity is not restricted to one segment of history. Nevertheless, not everything in the world, not everything in religion, can be attributed to the Spirit. The Paraclete is the Spirit of Jesus, and we orient ourselves by this insight. When we see Jesus' path, we know that the Spirit is near. As Lord of all, Jesus is the criterion of truth in religion, including the Christian religion.<sup>30</sup>

In this way, christology and pneumatology now act as complementary doctrines just as the two axioms of universality and particularity functioned previously.

What appears next from Pinnock is a comprehensive vision of the Spirit in the form of an impressive systematic theology. In *Flame of Love: A Theology of the Holy Spirit*, pneumatology is the central motif by which Pinnock approaches the doctrines of God, creation, christology, ecclesiology, soteriology, the religions, and truth. What is latent in 'An Inclusivist View' is proclaimed in *Flame of Love*: 'Christ, the only mediator, sustains particularity, while Spirit, the presence of God everywhere, safeguards universality.'<sup>31</sup> While there is not much that is distinctly new in this volume relative to Pinnock's inclusivism, it is possible to read *Flame of Love* as an extended and systematic argument for inclusivism, founded as it is upon the Trinity, connecting with the entire range of classical theological doctrines, and bringing them to bear on the explication of a theology of religions. Several pertinent themes are given further attention such as the connection between

28 Pinnock, 'An Inclusivist View', 105.

29 Ibid., 116; cf. also *Wideness*, 10; 'An Inclusivist View', 116; and *Flame of Love*, 207.

30 Ibid., 114.

31 Pinnock, *Flame of Love*, 192.

Spirit and creation, the inter-connection and distinction between the economies of the Son and the Spirit, the salvific process of recapitulation by which the Spirit both applies the work of Christ to us and by which we are incorporated via participation into the divine reality, the relationship between the Holy Spirit and the human spirit, and mission as an activity and event of the Spirit *par excellence*. Because of the systematic coherence by which all the doctrines are unified around the pneumatological theme, there is much greater depth to the assertion of the ubiquitous presence of the Spirit than before.

Having a renewed confidence, Pinnock is now able to state unequivocally that the Spirit is at work in the religions, and that divine truths have therefore been deposited in them: 'Though Jesus is not named in other faiths, Spirit is present and may be experienced.'<sup>32</sup> Pinnock is still reticent to sanction the view of Rahner and others that the religions are vehicles of grace. Yet he insists on being 'sensitive to the Spirit among people of other faiths without minimizing real and crucial differences between them.'<sup>33</sup> The possibility of revelation is affirmed, in fact, welcomed, in the religions, without displacing the centrality of Christ. This, of course, places the Christian under obligation to learn from the religions.

Because truths are embedded in various religious traditions, we ought to seek redemptive bridges to other traditions and inquire if God's word has been heard by their adherents. We ought to look at other traditions with empathic understanding and at our own religion with a critical eye. If we did so, we might be enriched and be moved to do our theology less in the 'Christian ghetto' and more globally.<sup>34</sup>

Yet how is the Spirit's presence and activity in the world of religions discerned, and how do we confront and pronounce judgment on that which is not of God? Pinnock does devote one section to this issue, where he elaborates further on the christological criterion (1 Jn. 4:2-3; Jn. 16:13-14, 14:26). Traces of Jesus which reveal the presence of the Spirit include 'self-sacrificing love, care about community, longings for justice, wherever people love one another, care for the sick, make peace not war, wherever there is beauty and concord, generosity and forgiveness, [and] the cup of cold water.'<sup>35</sup> These criteria, however, give the appearance of a natural morality which appears to

32 Ibid., 204.

33 Ibid., 207.

34 Ibid., 201. He further reasons that since religion is an important element, if not the most important segment of culture, 'it would be strange if the Spirit excused himself from the very arena of culture where people search for meaning' (ibid., 203).

35 Ibid., 209-10. Pinnock notes that these are the criteria used by Jesus himself in Mt. 25:35.

be substantiated apart from biblical Christianity. Further, they suggest that praxis be accentuated in the encounter with the religions to the neglect of addressing conflicting doctrinal beliefs and truth claims, both of which are normally propositional in form.

To assist in the discernment of truth, Pinnock notes other aids that have been divinely provided: the apostolic tradition, the Scriptures as the norm of truth, a prayerful and worshipping community, charismatic gifts such as the discernment of spirits, and the ecclesial offices of oversight. What the Spirit does is relate the Christian tradition, the truth of Scripture, and the believing Christian community meaningfully to the world and vice-versa, and in so leavening the world, allows it to move in such a direction that it can come to realize the truth of Jesus Christ. Does Pinnock succeed in convincing evangelicals of the viability of theological inclusivism regarding the religions?

## II. The Exclusivist Critique

In spite of the impressive work done by Pinnock, evangelicals are still troubled. Quite naturally, he has come under the fire of the defenders of exclusivistic orthodoxy. Ronald Nash has charged inclusivists like John Sanders and Pinnock with fostering an unrealistic and unbiblical romanticism based on feeling and emotion, promoting a dangerously lax attitude toward missions and evangelism, and implicitly affirming a salvation by human works.<sup>36</sup> Others have taken Pinnock to task by questioning how an evangelical confession of Christ can cohere with an openness to the truth and goodness in the experiences of religious others; whether or not the religions are being affected and transformed by Christ to the degree that the inclusivists say they are; what the vagueness of inclusivistic polemics prove; and to what extent their presumption about the Holy Spirit's operation in the religions can be justified.<sup>37</sup> These questions highlight some of the unresolved issues in inclusivism, and intimate that inclusivism raises more questions than it provides answers. Inclusivists have to further explicate how discerning their theological vision actually is, both as to the religions and as to the question of the Spirit's presence and activity.

### *Discerning the religions*

One of the concerns of exclusivists is that inclusivism floats on theological generalizations which assert the possibility of salvation for those in

<sup>36</sup> Ronald Nash, *Is Jesus the Only Savior?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 148.

<sup>37</sup> For these criticisms of Pinnock, see Ramesh P. Richard, *The Population of Heaven: A Biblical Response to the Inclusivist Position on Who Will Be Saved* (Chicago: Moody, 1994), 72–95, and R. Douglas Geivett and W. Gary Phillips, 'Response to Clark H. Pinnock', in *More Than One Way?*, 133–40.

other religious traditions, but does not specify when and how some can be either saved or damned in these traditions. Representative of those who remain unconvinced are the exclusivists Geivett and Phillips. They insist that the inclusivistic argument which reasons from the universal divine presence to the universal operation of divine grace in the religions is vague to the point of rendering Christians impotent against idolatry, false truth claims, and perverse systems of thought. Non-Christians religions are at least misleading and at worst distortions of general revelation that have abandoned the truth for a lie (they reference Rom. 1:22–25; 1 Cor. 8:4–7; 1 Jn. 5:19–21). They conclude that 'even the pervasiveness of God's grace does not entail that God is somehow soteriologically present within alternative religious traditions.'<sup>38</sup>

As previously noted, however, Pinnock has consistently denied (especially against the inclusivism of Rahner) that the religions are divinely appointed ways of salvation. An evangelical inclusivism does not propagate the notion that the religions themselves save as such, but only opens up the possibility that sufficient general revelation may predispose non-Christians toward the salvation that has been secured by Christ. Pinnock and the other inclusivists, it must be remembered, are also very concerned with the relativism and the universalism of pluralists like Hick and Knitter. It is for this reason that the evangelical inclusivists are very careful to insist on the importance of dialogue and the need for discernment with regard to competing and contradicting truth claims.

But how is general revelation related, if at all, to the religions, and is it saving? On these matters, inclusivists have to shoulder the responsibility for this ambiguity. Pinnock himself admitted early in *Wideness* that 'optimism of salvation has much to contribute to our attitude regarding other religions in general, though only a little in the way of specific detail.'<sup>39</sup> Even when specific criteria are provided to distinguish between the saved and the damned, Pinnock takes away with one hand what the other hand grants. This is evident in his discussion of how holy pagans are recognized. In referring to the narrative of Cornelius, Pinnock notes that Peter provides both cognitive ('one who fears God') and ethical ('one who does what is right') criteria (Acts 10:34–35). Yet no sooner is this done than in the ensuing pages Pinnock seems to eliminate or at least play down the role of the former. He first considers the case of Jews, Muslims, and even African traditionalists who all adhere to a supreme being: 'We may assume that they are intending to worship the one Creator God that we also serve.'<sup>40</sup> In his

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38 Geivett and Phillips, 'Response to Clark H. Pinnock', 134.

39 Pinnock, *Wideness*, 46.

40 *Ibid.*, 97.



later discussion of the 'faith principle', he asserts that 'according to the Bible, people are saved by faith, not by the content of their theology.'<sup>41</sup> The fact that this cognitive criterion is often left unsatisfied may have led Pinnock to ask if the ethical criterion alone may suffice in bringing an individual into divine favor. Quoting Je. 22:16 "He defended the cause of the poor and needy, and so all went well. Is that not what it means to know me?" Pinnock concludes that 'a person may know God without it coming to verbal expression.'<sup>42</sup> It is no wonder, given Pinnock's use of the faith principle, that exclusivists like Erickson ask 'whether sufficient elements are built into his [Pinnock's] theology to prevent it from slipping into . . . subjectivism.'<sup>43</sup>

This indecisiveness regarding criteriology shows forth in Pinnock's references to Buddhism. On the one hand, he denies that Buddhism, especially of the Zen variety, satisfies the cognitive criterion since it proclaims an agnosticism of the void, if not an explicit atheism with regard to a personal deity; yet on the other hand, an individual like the Buddha himself seems to have satisfied the ethical criterion. He asks, 'how can one fail to appreciate the noble aspects of the Buddha, whose ethical direction, compassion, and concern for others is so moving that it appears God is at work in his life?'<sup>44</sup> He then goes on to query about whether the *dharma* 'promotes redemption and salvation' and whether *nirvana* can be interpreted in a way that is 'suggestive of revelation.'<sup>45</sup> In doing so, however, Pinnock in practice seems to have disregarded the cognitive criterion. If the *dharma* and *nirvana* can both be understood in the way he suggests, why not the Zen doctrine of the void? While there are distinct and vast differences between Zen and Christian mysticism, is it not also possible to see analogues such as that between *sunyata* (emptiness and nothingness) in Zen experience and the 'God beyond God' reality of the Christian apophatic tradition? By saying this, I am neither insisting that Zen mysticism is entirely compatible with Christian contemplation, nor am I trying to devalue Pinnock's musings. I am simply pointing out that his criteria, both few and inconsistently applied, result in unsubstantiated generalizations regarding the religions.

It should not be surprising, then, to see an exclusivist like Ramesh Richard charge Pinnock with being guilty of hasty generalizations, simplistic reductionisms, question-begging, ambiguities and equivocations.<sup>46</sup> This is the case because Pinnock's success in finding

41 Ibid., 157.

42 Ibid., 98.

43 Millard J. Erickson, *How Shall They Be Saved? The Destiny of Those Who Do Not Hear of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1996), 187.

44 Pinnock, *Wideness*, 100.

45 Ibid.

46 Richard, *The Population of Heaven*, 81-85.

parallels and resemblances is obtained in part by disregarding the unique cultural-linguistic frameworks which undergird the various religious traditions. Rather than presuming the god of African traditional religion to be the biblical creator, Richard thinks otherwise. For him, it is more in accord with empirical reality to say that this 'animistic high-god seems closer to the Muslim Satan than to the biblical God.'<sup>47</sup> Richard raises a good point that Pinnock is aware of: how can comparative theology of religions maintain Christian normativeness while at the same time avoiding theological imperialism, and how can comparisons be made which heed the empirical differences between diverse and conflicting traditions? The problem for inclusivists, of course, is the argument that grace may be present even in the non-Christian religions. It can be identified either in Christian terms or according to the concepts and categories of the particular religions. To do the former is to risk reductionism and to arbitrarily strip the other religions of their own particularities. To do the latter is to risk that which is distinctively Christian; worse yet, it is to suggest that not only goodness, truth, and nobility inhere in other religions, but that such may also either be preparatory for or somehow mediate salvation. Is it possible to assert the Spirit's presence while denying that saving grace is being active?

### *Discerning the spirit*

The problem is further compounded when Pinnock and the inclusivists resort to the pneumatological argument. Discernment in this case seems to be rendered even more difficult. The pneumatological approach is fraught with ambiguities and frequently labors under the burden of subjectivity. Imagine the concerns of the exclusivists when they read:

While acknowledging the gracious presence of the Spirit in human life and culture, I am not dogmatic about how that hidden grace is present exactly. Whether a religion serves as a means of grace remains an open question, needing more study and always careful discernment. We do not know exactly what role, if any, a given religion plays in the divine economy. We are simply confident that the Spirit is operating in every sphere to draw people to God, using religion when and where it is possible and appropriate.<sup>48</sup>

It is no surprise that Geivett and Phillips demand clarification of Pinnock since 'to say that God's grace may be encountered through other religions is vague. Which other religions? And what elements?'<sup>49</sup>

47 *Ibid.*, 83.

48 Pinnock, 'An Inclusivist View', 106.

49 Geivett and Phillips, 'Response to Clark H. Pinnock', 140.

Alister McGrath asks an almost identical question. While he commends Pinnock for seeing in the religions both 'noble truths' and 'terrible errors', he queries, how do we know which beliefs are 'truths' and which are 'errors'? There is a need for an evaluative framework, an interpretive grid, that allows us to criticize the religions.<sup>50</sup>

Pinnock does not quell the misgivings of exclusivists when he speaks of the Spirit as the 'empirical power that breaks forth in perceptible ways' without providing assistance for an investigation of this empirical reality.<sup>51</sup> They are not comforted when they read, 'we do not claim to know how the Spirit works among non-Christians, but only that he is active.'<sup>52</sup> He inevitably returns to the christological criterion: 'The ways of God are admittedly hard to track, but movements of the Spirit in history can be seen because they are movements of the Spirit of Jesus'. The truth of it [the *filioque*] is precisely the point about Christ's being the criterion of Spirit activity.<sup>53</sup> But even such assertions, critics feel, remain at the level of a theological abstraction that does not provide the assurance of discriminating discernment. In short, without more concrete guidelines as to what is and is not salvific in the other religions, inclusivism's granting even the theological possibility of salvation in the non-Christian traditions is tantamount to a declaration both of the existential reality of this salvation outside of Christianity and the overall goodness, general truthfulness, and salvific potency of the non-Christian religions. When Pinnock lists only the most obvious examples of falsity and the demonic in the religions (such as his mention of the religious practices of the Aztec child sacrifices, Haitian voodoo, the caste system of popular Hinduism, and Muslim fundamentalism<sup>54</sup>), he does not boost the confidence of traditionalists that he is able to discern boldly what appear to be the more ambiguous, borderline cases.

#### *An all-too-rosy-eyed optimism?*

I am arguing that undeveloped criteria for discerning the religions by inclusivists have contributed to exclusivist complaints of an unwarranted optimism. While I do not think that these objections can be decisively answered, yet I do think that they may be in principle, but only, as Pinnock has repeatedly pointed out, through the extended process of dialogue and empirical investigation. Thus, Pinnock says, 'The purpose of dialogue is in part testing . . . truth claims. We enter

50 Alister McGrath, 'Response to Clark H. Pinnock', *More Than One Way?*, 131.

51 Pinnock, *Flame of Love*, 195.

52 *Ibid.*, 207.

53 *Ibid.*, 211.

54 Pinnock, *Wideness*, 91.

into dialogue from a Christian commitment, accepting that all claims, including our own, are provisional, and we seek to show that the revelation of God in Jesus Christ is the best able to illumine human life and pass the other tests for truth.<sup>55</sup> Clearly, Pinnock's inclusivism forestalls dogmatic pronouncements on the religions in favor of an open-ended conversation, both with fellow Christians as well as those of the other religions. In a very real sense, an inclusivistic theology of religions not only opens the door to interreligious dialogue but also requires that process to run its course. But here again, the red flags of traditionalists spring up. Interreligious dialogue, in order to be genuine, has to be approached with a sincerity that not only listens to the other, but is also willing to be transformed by any truth discovered in the other's position.

Pinnock has yet to establish that such dialogue is not susceptible to theological confusion or that it is able to adjudicate the conflicting truth claims of the various religions. Exclusivists fear that inclusivism inculcates in Christians an un-critical acceptance of the validity of religious and spiritual experiences of other traditions. Further, inasmuch as inclusivism recognizes other religious traditions and their sacred books as mediating salvation in some way, this dilutes the venerable Christian distinction between general and special revelation; if, in fact, biblical revelation is not absolutely required for salvation, are the pluralists not correct in their assertion of the fundamental compatibility of all religions, that 'all roads lead to Rome'? Inclusivists would therefore become practical relativists, or worse, liberal-pluralist wolves masquerading in evangelical-inclusivist clothing.<sup>56</sup> Most importantly, to grant to adherents of the other religions even the possibility of salvation within the parameters of their tradition is to sound the death knell of Christian evangelism and missions. In short, the motivating exclusivistic concerns are that central Christian convictions as traditionally understood such as revelation, the Church, and missions, would no longer hold within an inclusivistic framework. An inclusivist optimism runs the risk of eventually betraying the *raison d'être* of evangelicalism. It seems that inclusivism will remain less than convincing so long as it cannot be more specific about how truth is to be argued, or how the Spirit is to be discerned, in the concrete world of the religions. The secure confines of evangelical exclusivism will remain appealing

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55 Pinnock, 'An Inclusivist View', 114. Pinnock's non-foundationalist epistemology is here evident again.

56 Inclusivism as a half-way house toward pluralism is the concern of many traditionalists; cf. Nash, *Is Jesus the Only Savior?*, 172, and also Millard Erickson, *The Evangelical Left: Encountering Postconservative Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1997), 131-147.

so long as evangelical optimism fails to fully, truthfully, and discerningly engage the historical religions.<sup>57</sup>

### III. Whither Theological Inclusivism?

In my summary of Clark Pinnock's theological inclusivism, I endeavored to demonstrate the biblical depth and systematic breadth of an evangelical theology of religions. Having reviewed the inclusivist argument, I am convinced that it is not as weak as the exclusivists think in these aspects. Of course, their exegesis is far from uncontroversial, and the arguments espoused will be subjected to the ongoing debates between biblical scholars. At the same time, I have also claimed that evangelical inclusivists paid insufficient attention to the question of the empirical religions. The question that remains is how inclusivists can be religiously discerning and avoid seeing too optimistically. My conviction of the viability of inclusivism as a way of making sense of religious pluralism is tempered by the realization that much more work needs to be done before evangelicals of the exclusivistic variety will be ready to concede its feasibility.

There are really two interrelated sets of questions regarding discernment that have emerged as a result of this investigation. The first is an intra-Christian matter concerned with the theology of *salvation*: is it possible for the unevangelized to be saved, and if so, how? While important, this question is not the focus on my paper, nor can it be addressed here. The other set of questions then have to do with the theology of *religions*: is it possible that the religions are infused with general revelation? Is it possible that the religions mediate salvation? What is good, noble, true, or even salvific about the religions? Discernment here involves a number of issues, intersecting at various levels. In terms of comparative method, the question arises whether it would be justifiable to interpret the diverse religious traditions according to foreign (in this case, Christian) categories? Perhaps, but that such comparisons would be viable should not be taken for granted. The concept of 'general revelation', for instance, is a distinctively Christian one, and it may prove difficult to demonstrate that the religions bear within themselves the fruit of general revelation as

<sup>57</sup> Space constraints do not allow me to review the arguments of other inclusivists. Suffice it to say that either the framework of interpretation and comparison are simplistically moralistic (Stanley Grenz, 'Toward an Evangelical Theology of the Religions', *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 31:1-2 [1994], 49-65), too vague (John Sanders, *No Other Name*), or decidedly one-sided in terms of the criteria employed (Norman Anderson, *Christianity and World Religions: The Challenge of Pluralism* [Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity, 1984]).

understood by Christians, if, as Nash and others have queried, general revelation be defined within a Christian theological framework. In this case, would it be surprising if one did not find the religions attesting to general revelation? Goodness, nobility, and truth are all defined variously by the religions. Gotama's insistence on the tragic character of existence can be said to parallel Qohelet's dictum that 'all is vanity.' Yet to equate them both without acknowledging the profoundly different visions of Buddhist cosmology and the Hebrew theistic worldview would be methodologically unpardonable. The notion of 'salvation' is not as easily transferable across religious boundaries as one might think. In fact, the reason the question of whether or not the religions mediate salvation has persisted throughout the inclusivist-exclusivist debate is probably because it is a misunderstood one. 'Salvation' has not proven to be a productive comparative category simply because there are a diversity of ailments diagnosed by the religions and a correspondingly diverse number of cures.<sup>58</sup> To affirm that the religions mediate Christian salvation (something which Pinnock has repeatedly denied) would not only distort the religions as they understand themselves, but also wrongly change the parameters of the discussion and the nature of the stakes involved. For then the question that inclusivists would need to answer is no longer whether or not religion is salvific, but whether or not this or that religious tradition, practice, ritual, or doctrine, mediates Christian salvation. The dialogue may eventually proceed to the point where this question emerges, but, at the present stage, it is prematurely posed, and therefore, essentially misplaced. The discernment presently required is not so much that which identifies what is good, true, noble and salvific in the religions, but that which comprehends how goodness, truth, nobility and salvation as Christians understand them are or are not applicable to the various religions. In short, the religions need to be discerned in a manner such that adequate descriptive categories are formulated that will both avoid diluted reductionisms of the religions and generate legitimate comparisons across the diverse traditions.

I have no intention in the little remaining space to detail what such a criteriology or comparative methodology will look like or how they will function. What is clear, however, is that effective theological comparisons should do two things: they should lift up what is important in the things compared as determined by criteria identified in their own terms, and they should elicit via categories that are neutral to the

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58 On this point, see Joseph A. D'Noia, *The Diversity of Religions: A Christian Perspective* (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1992), 34–64, and S. Mark Heim, *Salvations: Truth and Difference in Religion* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1995).

things compared an analysis of similarities and contrasts.<sup>59</sup> McGrath is therefore only partly correct when he admonishes against importing 'a set of criteria from outside the Christian revelation and allow[ing] that to become of normative importance in evaluating the religions. We must develop a Christian response on the basis of a Christian set of criteria.'<sup>60</sup> Christian criteria are needed to discern its own important (i.e., redemptive) features. But neutral descriptive categories need to be developed in order to respect the importances and the particularities of the different traditions.

It is therefore necessary to re-emphasize the call of Pinnock and others for a more sustained dialogical engagement with the empirical religions so as to develop the criteria and comparative methodology required for discerning what is good, true, noble, and salvific in other traditions. Inclusivists have attempted to lay a firm biblical and theological foundation for their vision. Yet they have encouraged the very kind of 'rosy-eyed optimism' about which they have warned precisely because of a lack of a discerning comparative theological method. May the ongoing discussion of an evangelical *theologia religionum* proceed.<sup>61</sup>

### Abstract

What are the issues at stake in an evangelical theology of religions? This paper focuses on the inclusivism of Clark Pinnock, who has developed the most comprehensive evangelical theology of religions to date, in order to assess its strengths and weaknesses. It is argued that underlying the exclusivist critique of Pinnock and his inclusivist colleagues is the concern that evangelical inclusivism lays itself open to the charge of relativism insofar as the possibility of divine presence and activity is allowed in the non-Christian religions without any substantive criteria being developed for discerning when this is or is not the case. Some suggestions are offered in conclusion as to how theological inclusivists can strengthen their argument and further the debate.

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59 Cf. Robert Neville's thesis of theorizing as a process of comparison in his *Normative Cultures* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1995), especially 37–84. I develop and apply aspects of Neville's work to the task of discerning the religions in my recently completed dissertation, *Discerning the Spirit(s): A Pentecostal-Charismatic Contribution to Christian Theology of Religions* (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms International, 1999).

60 McGrath, 'Response to Clark H. Pinnock', 131.

61 Stan Spicer was especially helpful in proofreading multiple versions of this paper. I am also grateful to Dennis Cheek and R. Douglas Geivett for commenting on an earlier draft of this essay. The opinions expressed, however, remain mine and should not be attributed to any of the above in any way.