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Postmodernity, the Paradigm and the Pre-Eminence of Christ

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For three decades discussions concerning the uniqueness of Christ in a multi-religious context have been framed by Alan Race's 1982 paradigm of pluralism, inclusivism and exclusivism.[1] These three positions became the paradigmatic identifiers for locating people whenever discussions arose about Christian views regarding salvation *vis a vis* the rise in the consciousness of religious plurality. The stunning success and three decade longevity of this taxonomy is largely due to the fact that it was so readily picked up by writers across the theological divide. Pluralists, inclusivists and exclusivists all readily used and embraced the categories. However, only rarely did any writer raise any serious objections to the theological assumptions which lay behind the paradigm as a whole, though, over the years, there have been many critiques of the nomenclature itself. I shall argue that despite attempts to qualify or modify this paradigm, we must now recognize the inadequacy of Race's taxonomy, or any modification thereof, to serve our present context. After some historical perspectives, I will seek to highlight some theological, historical and structural problems with the entire taxonomy, linking it with the particular challenges – and opportunities – posed by the epistemological shift in what is popularly called postmodernism. Finally, I will also set forth a way ahead for this discussion which is rooted in the *missio dei* and Trinitarian theology, avoids theological reductionism, and moves beyond merely lamenting postmodern epistemology, seeking, instead, a path to positive engagement with a post-Enlightenment, post-Christendom, postmodern, pluralistic generation with the apostolic message.

I. Historical perspectives on Alan Race's categories

Despite the widespread use of Alan Race's tripartite taxonomy, most of us are well aware that for over a decade there has been a growing sense of dis-ease regarding the particulars of the framework which has come from writers across the theological spectrum. For example, consider inclusivist Gavin d'Costa's journey from his 1986 *Theology and Religious Pluralism* – which enthusiastically embraces the three categories – to his 2009 *Christianity and the World Religions*

1 This article was delivered as the annual Laing Lecture, given at London School of Theology on 18 February 2014. References to the setting of a live audience have been retained.

– which is far more critical of the helpfulness of the categories.[2] As an exclusivist, my own journey involves tweaking the exclusivist nomenclature as early as 2001, calling it 'engaged exclusivism'.[3] By 2010, my Trinitarian missiology renames all three categories and adds a fourth. We should also recall pluralist Paul Knitter's journey from his 1985 *No Other Name?* – which openly acknowledges his indebtedness to Race's paradigm and to which his models share 'an amazing and confirming similarity'[4] – to his extensive re-working of the paradigm in his 2002 *Theologies of Religion*, changing the nomenclature for each of the positions and adding a fourth position along the spectrum.[5] He renames the exclusivist position the 'replacement model', the inclusivist position he re-names the 'fulfillment model', and pluralism he re-names the 'mutuality model'. He continues to cite John Hick as the premier example of the pluralistic/mutuality model. However, in a shift for Knitter, he is surprisingly critical of John Hick's pluralism, citing the inherent relativism, the superficiality of his analysis, and the reductionistic caricatures which result when one tries to discover common ground among the world's religions. Finally, parting a bit from the three-fold paradigm, Knitter suggests a fourth model in response to the post-liberal writers from Yale such as George Lindbeck and Hans Frei, and the idea of multiple salvations in the writings of Mark Heim, from Andover Newton. This fourth paradigm, which Knitter calls the 'acceptance model,' is, broadly speaking, an attempt to respond to the peculiar challenges of an emerging postmodern epistemology which, in various ways, defies the three traditional categories of Race.

For evangelicals, many of whom would embrace some variation of what Race calls exclusivism, Knitter's 2002 work is significant for another reason. Knitter openly acknowledges that he has come to recognize that the evangelical position is far more nuanced than he originally recognized. This recognition by Knitter is important. Knitter chooses Karl Barth as his sole representative model for the exclusivist position, which he calls the 'Conservative Evangelical Model'.[6] Now, quite a few evangelicals objected to Knitter choosing Barth as the representative example. Because this taxonomy was designed to foster discussions about soteriology in the context of religious pluralism, evangelicals were uncomfortable with Barth's leaving the soteriological door open to universalism. In his *Church Dogmatics*, Barth famously insisted that God's grace is free and therefore we can neither assume universalism as some kind of imposed system of liberalism, nor can we categorically rule universalism out, because God remains eternally free

2 Gavin d'Costa, *Theology and Religious Pluralism* (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 1986); *Christianity and the World Religions: Disputed Questions in the Theology of Religions* (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009).

3 Timothy C. Tennent, *Christianity at the Religious Roundtable* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), 25–27.

4 Paul F. Knitter, *No Other Name? A Critical Survey of Christian Attitudes Toward the World Religions* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1985), xvi.

5 Paul F. Knitter, *Theologies of Religions* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2002).

6 Paul F. Knitter, *No Other Name?*, 75–96.

in his exercise of grace.[7] However, there is another reason why Knitter's choice of Barth is worth noting. Barth's position of radical discontinuity (at least as interpreted by Knitter) provides neither an ontological nor epistemological basis for natural theology. So, one of the major objections Knitter sets forth against evangelicalism is the view which says that 'revelation is found *only* in Jesus Christ'. Because Knitter assumes that all evangelicals are fideistic, there is little theological space left to discuss how God reveals himself through general revelation, or the Spirit's activity in the pre-Christian heart, or even the pre-Christian religious heart.

If you read the leading pluralist authors who speak about evangelical exclusivsim, it becomes clear that they tend to align us with a more pessimistic attitude towards general revelation and a more confrontational approach to culture than many of us actually have, either today, or through history. It is frequently assumed that contemporary evangelicalism is the modern day expression of a seamless confrontational trajectory which runs from Tertullian to Hendrick Kraemer. There seems to be less of an appreciation that there is another trajectory which runs from Justin Martyr's *logos spermatikos* through Thomas Aquinas's *Gratia non tollit sed perficit naturam* – i.e. grace does not abrogate but perfects nature – to the Wesleyan doctrine of prevenient grace, and so on. This is why Knitter's *Theologies of Religion* is so significant. Knitter is the first major pluralist writer to propose a structure which takes into account a whole stream of evangelicals who accept general revelation as, among other things, a *preparatio evangelica*. Knitter specifically notes the contribution of Harold Netland from Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, especially his 2001 *Encountering Religious Pluralism*.[8] Significantly, Knitter nuances the exclusivist view, which he has re-named the 'replacement model', by distinguishing between what he calls the 'total replacement' view and the 'partial replacement' view, the latter referring to exclusivistic evangelicals who, nevertheless hold a more robust view of general revelation and, at least potentially, affirm the possibility of points of continuity and truth in other religions. Knitter's qualification sheds light not only on how evangelicals are perceived, but also why so many evangelical writers were always qualifying what *they* actually meant by exclusivism.

We have, perhaps, not fully appreciated the long-term legacy of Hendrick Kraemer's well known and uncompromising defense of the exclusivistic position in his landmark book, *The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World*.[9] While Kraemer's actual position regarding general revelation and fulfillment possibilities became more nuanced, there is no doubt that his uncompromising text had a powerful influence on the subsequent development of 20th-century evangelical views, some of which Kraemer himself may not have embraced. Kraemer's book was originally written to provoke discussion for the World Missionary Con-

7 Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* 2.2 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2004 2nd edition), 417.
8 Harold Netland, *Encountering Religious Pluralism* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2001).
9 Hendrick Kraemer, *The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World* (London: Edinburgh House Press, 1938).

ference in Madras, India in 1938. Kraemer's work has become a classic exposition of the exclusivist position. Echoing Barth's dialectic perspective, he advocated what he called a 'radical discontinuity' between the Christian faith and the beliefs of all other religions. Kraemer refused to divide revelation into the categories of general and special which might allow for the possibility of any revelation outside the explicit proclamation of the Christian gospel.[10] For Kraemer, Jesus Christ is the decisive revelation of God which confronts the entire human race and stands over against all other attempts by other religions or philosophies to 'apprehend the totality of existence'.[11] Kraemer's attack on what he calls 'omnipresent relativism' includes dismantling anything which would chip away at the vast gulf which exists between God and the human race. This involves the separation of nature and grace, or reason and revelation.

Kraemer is, of course, sometimes unfairly caricatured as being overly pessimistic and confrontational. It is important to remember the context into which he spoke. There was a growing, positive assessment of world religions which was emerging out of the 19th-century fascination with applying Darwinian ideas of evolution to science, sociology, religion and ethics.[12] In the writings of Max Müller (1823–1900), the concept of evolution robbed Christianity of all claims to revelation, and the origins of religion were viewed as an expression of universal human experience.[13] All religions were arranged in stages from the lower religions to the higher, monotheistic religions. Kraemer was absolutely correct in standing against this relativistic trend. However, there were scholars as well as missionaries who adopted the fulfillment concept within a more evangelical framework. The most well known scholar to do this was Monier Monier-Williams (1819–1901) at Oxford. Monier-Williams argued for the supremacy of historical Christianity as divinely revealed. He was convinced that, in time, all the other religions of the world would someday crumble as they came into contact with the truth of the Christian gospel. However, he developed a far more positive attitude towards the world religions arguing that Christianity would be victorious, not because it *refuted* all religions, but because it *fulfilled* them. Monier-Williams argued that all religions reveal universal, God-given instincts, desires and aspirations which are met in the Christian gospel, not unlike what Justin Martyr had argued about human philosophies. The missionary community, particularly in India where they were meeting such stiff resistance from Hinduism,

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

11 Kraemer, *Christian Message*, 113.

12 Charles Darwin (1809–82) published his landmark *On the Origin of Species by means of Natural Selection* in 1859. Later, Herbert Spencer (1820–1903) demonstrated how evolution should be applied to all areas of human existence.

13 See, for example, Max Müller, *Origin and Growth of Religion* (Varanasi: Indological Book House, 1964).

latched onto fulfillment ideas and began to explore them with earnest in the early years of the twentieth century. The most notable and articulate expression of fulfillment thought came from missionaries working in India such as T. E. Slater (1840–1912) in his work, *Higher Hinduism in Relation to Christianity* and J. N. Farquhar's (1861–1929) landmark book, *The Crown of Hinduism* published in 1913. Farquhar and Slater were two of the earliest scholars to produce major works which ambitiously set out to compare the doctrines of Hinduism with doctrines in Christianity, demonstrating a fulfillment theme.[14] Farquhar sought to establish a non-confrontational bridge for the Hindu to cross over to Christianity because, he argued, all of the notable features and aspirations within Hinduism find their highest expression and ultimate fulfillment in Christianity. He based the fulfillment theme on Christ's claim in Matthew 5:17 that He had not come to abolish or destroy, but to fulfill.

The fulfillment motif among bona fide evangelicals did not have time to mature theologically before it was snuffed out with the publication of Kraemer's *Christian Message*, which reasserted a more rigid, uncompromising stand toward world religions. On the liberal side, the ongoing rise of rationalistic presuppositions further encouraged evangelicals to close ranks. However, the idea of a radical positive assessment of world religions without relinquishing the supremacy of Christianity found new expression in the second major attitude toward world religions known as inclusivism. The Roman Catholic, post-Vatican II position of inclusivism – especially as advocated by the German Jesuit Karl Rahner in his *Theological Investigations* – emerged, in part, because of the inadequacies of dialectic forms of exclusivism. Inclusivism made significant inroads from Vatican II Catholicism to evangelicalism largely through compelling arguments as to how God worked in the lives of those outside the boundaries of the covenant such as Rahab and Naaman. Because evangelicals had been pushed away from natural theology, *preparatio evangelica*, *logos spermatikos* and prevenient grace, we lost sufficient theological space adequately to discuss God's presence in human culture preparing men and women to receive his word and the revelation of Christ.

The more positive view of the relationship between general and special revelation was such a welcome relief from the complete separation of nature and grace as seen in Kraemer that many, even within evangelicalism, were persuaded of the inclusivistic position. Most everyone in this gathering will be well aware of John Sanders's *No Other Name* or Clark Pinnock's, *There is a Wideness in God's Mercy*.[15] As an exclusivist – or as I prefer, a revelatory particularist – I have been critical of inclusivism's entry into evangelicalism. From my perspective, the inclusivist's attempt to drive a wedge between the ontological necessity of Christ's

14 See, J. N. Farquhar, *The Crown of Hinduism* (Oxford University Press, 1913; reprinted in New Delhi: Oriental Books Reprint Corporation, 1971). See also, T. E. Slater, *Higher Hinduism in Relation to Christianity* (London: E. Stock, 1903).

15 John Sanders, *No Other Name* (London: SPCK, 1994); Clark H. Pinnock, *A Wideness in God's Mercy* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 1997).

work and the epistemological response of repentance and faith in the believer is biblically unsustainable. Furthermore, the undue separation of soteriology from ecclesiology which is necessitated by a thoroughgoing inclusivism is, in my view, objectionable. Nevertheless, I find myself quite sympathetic to the concerns and objections which have been raised by Sanders, Pinnock, and others. The unresolved tensions between exclusivism and inclusivism tend to highlight two unresolved problems with Alan Race's structure – one historical, the other structural. Historically, as already noted, the tripartite structure had been unnecessarily wed to overly restricted views regarding general revelation. I cannot tell you how many times I have heard in various inter-religious dialogue gatherings someone trying to sum up very succinctly for a lay person what is meant by exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism by saying, basically the three positions are 'closed' 'partially open' and 'open'. This is, of course, a caricature, but it does underscore the overall perception. Race himself, a committed pluralist, originally actually described the exclusivist position as 'closed' and the inclusivist Clark Pinnock describes exclusivists as those who see other religions as 'zones of darkness'.[16] This is why I think Paul Knitter's 2002 bifurcation of the exclusivistic position into the 'total replacement' and 'partial replacement' is so significant.[17]

The second problem with the paradigm is theological. There is the obvious problem which plagues the entire discussion in that the term 'salvation' is used when what is actually meant is justification. Furthermore, the entire paradigm operates under the assumption that the doctrine of soteriology in the New Testament can somehow flourish outside of the larger context of the entire metanarrative which I am referring to in a short hand way as the *missio dei*. These are core theological problems. Biblical salvation cannot be reduced to justification and the entire doctrine of soteriology can no longer be taken out of the larger theological frame of the metanarrative. In my view, this is what made exclusivism vulnerable to inclusivism and, speaking frankly, this is the very same problem which will make the category exclusivism – however many ways we re-name it, or tweak it – unintelligible to the next generation of evangelicals. We are only one generation from the collapse of exclusivism within evangelical ranks unless we address this fundamental problem.

II. Rebuilding the metanarrative in a postmodern world

Before I propose a possible way ahead for this problem, I need to say a bit more about postmodernism in relation to Alan Race's categories. For ten years now writers have pointed out that the tripartite taxonomy of Race, however you adjust the nomenclature, is not an adequate response to the emergence of a postmodern epistemology. This is why Knitter added a fourth category, which he called the 'acceptance model', and why I added a fourth category, which I called the 'narrative model.'

16 Pinnock, *Wideness*, 14.
17 Knitter, *Theologies of Religions*.

However, this may be like putting a band-aid over a very serious infection. We are all well aware that even a cursory survey of Christian publications concerning postmodernism reveals that evangelicals are divided about whether postmodernism represents a formidable threat or a remarkable opportunity for the church. On the one hand, quite a few writers emphasize that an extraordinary epistemological shift has taken place. The French philosopher Jean-Francois Lyotard famously described this as 'postmodernism' because it represented for him the collapse of the 'grand narrative' of the Enlightenment Project which was constructed on belief in the inevitability of human progress, confidence in human reason, and the autonomy of self. This collapse of the 'canopy of meaning' has, in turn, unleashed a deep cultural malaise which has left an entire generation suspicious about authority (flattening of all authority – no high God, no high king – opening the door to the new atheism), and lacking confidence in the entire possibility of the very category of truth (epistemological crisis) and therefore the possibility of objective revelation (rejection of Biblical authority). Without God, revelation and authority (to recall intentionally the title of Carl Henry's 6 volume *magnus opus*), we are left adrift on the sea of tiny personal narratives. If the Bible is read, the reader is the only really essential element since any text might have a 'multiplicity of actualizations'.[18] In this understanding of postmodernity, modernity, with all of its faults, still clung to an epistemological concern to objectively ground the world, whereas postmodernity is only concerned with 'imaginative and constructive descriptions of an infinite number of personal worlds'.[19] This is why Peter Berger observes that in postmodernity 'religion has become privately meaningful and publicly irrelevant'.[20] It is privately meaningful because it is an artificially constructed edifice of meaning, not because of any objective revelation. It is just one story among others 'about a distinctive compartment of our imagination and desires'.[21] Jack Davis argues that we now actually have three distinct competing ontological identities: the scientific materialistic self, the virtual digital self, and the trinitarian ecclesial self.[22] This is another reason why Race's taxonomy is so unfruitful. Words and affirmations no longer have the same meaning they once had. Alvin Plantinga helpfully points out that even belief in God in postmodernism is not actually to assert *necessarily* that an objective, ontological being exists. Rather, it is to adopt a certain attitude or a

18 Edgar V. McKnight, 'A Defense of a Postmodern use of the Bible' in *Faith and Rationality: Reason and Belief in God*, edited by Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff (Notre Dame and London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), 65–90, here 66.

19 Ibid., 66.

20 Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (New York: Doubleday, 1967), 133.

21 Richard Lints, 'The Vinyl Narratives: The Metanarrative of Postmodernity and the Recovery of a Churchly Theology' in *A Confessing Theology for Postmodern Times*, edited by Michael S. Horton (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2000), 98.

22 John Jefferson Davis, *Worship and the Reality of God* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2010), 37–75.

'kind of resolve' which 'embraces one's finitude'. Or, as Richard Braithwaite argues, it is 'the assertion of an intention to carry out a certain behavioral policy'.[23]

On the other hand, there are Christian thinkers who argue that postmodern thinking, on the whole, is really a reaction to the Enlightenment Project, more so than a rejection of the category of truth per se. Carl Raschke, for example, sees postmodernity as the necessary check to the autonomous individual and the over-reliance on human reason.[24] Postmodernity is not necessarily the total abandonment of the correspondence theory of truth, inevitably leading to philosophical nominalism, rejection of all absolutes, and finally, total relativism and nihilism. Rather, through this reading, postmodernity is calling out for more room for mystery, a deep longing for community and the re-awakening of the modern consciousness to the power of story and narrative. This is precisely the point which Richard Lints makes.[25] Christianity flourished prior to modernity, so we must believe that Christianity can flourish – at least potentially – in the absence of modernity.

While the emergence of postmodernism does pose a potentially grave threat to the entire notion of truth, I do think that strategically we must also recognize the positive potentials in the sunset of the Enlightenment project. The great task before this generation of Christian leaders is to reconstruct the great metanarrative for a postmodern world, and through that, proclaim anew the Pre-eminence of the Lord Jesus Christ! We must take advantage of their awakened consciousness to the power of story and narrative and tell a bigger story – the grand metanarrative of the redemptive story of God, the *missio dei*. We have to get serious about our theological discourse and put an end to minimalistic approaches. Evangelicals have become experts in finding a thousand new ways to ask the same question, '*What is the least one has to do to become a Christian?*' This is how the high ground of soteriology in the New Testament got reduced in the Alan Race categorization as a discussion about some minimalistic bar to declare someone justified. We are the ones who have boiled the entire glorious gospel down to a single phrase, a simple emotive transaction or some silly slogan. It is time for a new generation of Christians, committed to apostolic faith, to declare this minimalistic, reductionistic Christianity a failed project. It is wrong to try to get as many people as possible, to acknowledge as superficially as allowable, a gospel which is theologically unsustainable.

The re-construction of the metanarrative cannot be done unless we abandon these simple taxonomies and cast a much larger theological vision. Let me close with four recommendations for a way ahead.

First, all *soteriological discussions must be more intentionally embedded into*

23 Alvin Plantinga, 'Reason and Belief in God', in *Faith and Rationality: Reason and Belief in God*, edited by Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff (Notre Dame and London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), 19.

24 Carl Raschke, *The Next Reformation: Why Evangelicals Must Embrace Postmodernity* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2004).

25 Lints, 'Vinyl Narratives', 99.

a Trinitarian context which will be our greatest ally in reconstructing a metanarrative for postmoderns. The Christian gospel of salvation is unintelligible apart from the doctrine of the Trinity, since the doctrine of the Trinity is both the foundation and the goal of all Christian theologizing. This is the most practical way to keep all inter and intra-religious discussions within a broad theological frame which represents the fullness of the Christian proclamation.

God the Father is the source of all revelation. This connects exclusivistic particularism with the doctrine of creation and helps to maintain a robust view of general revelation. We can affirm that every religion, in various ways, contains 'the silent work of God'.[26] They reflect God's activity in the human heart and the human quest for God. Religions also reflect our unending attempts to flee from God, even in the guise of religious activity. As Calvin Shenk has observed, human religion reflects both 'cries for help and efforts of self-justification'.[27] The Reformers insightfully applied the 'law and gospel' theme to other religions by noting that other religions can serve one of the classic purposes of 'law'; namely, they can create such despair and unanswered questions in the life of the adherent that they come to the gospel of God's grace.[28]

God the Holy Spirit, as the agent of the New Creation, helps to place particularistic views within their native eschatological context. For Christians, salvation is far more that the doctrine of justification. To say that we are, to use Luther's phrase, 'dung hills covered in snow' only tells part of the story. Salvation involves our becoming full participants in the New Creation which is already breaking into the present order. This touches upon every aspect of culture. Daniel Johnson makes the helpful point that it is the eschatological context of the New Testament which puts limits to human history and thereby teaches us 'the requisite sense of human finitude'.[29] One need only recall the sheer number of popular apocalyptic films to see how deeply the idea of a necessary boundary to human history is embedded in human consciousness. But, in the gospel, the *eschaton* is more than a mere doomsday apocalyptic scenario; it is also God acting de-

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

27 Calvin E. Shenk, *Who do You Say that I Am?: Christians Encounter Other Religions* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1997), 75.

28 Terry Tiessen, following the work of Mariasuasai Dhavamony, makes the observation that cosmic religions focus on the revelation of God in creation; ethical religions reflect that the divine absolute makes himself known in the human conscience, and salvific religions are a response to the awareness of the fall and the need for salvation. See, Terry Tiessen, 'God's Work of Grace in the Context of the Religions', Διδασκαλια (Winter 2007), 165–91; originally published *Evangelical Review of Theology* 27/3 (July 2003), 247–67.

29 Daniel Johnson, 'Contrary Hopes: Evangelical Christianity and the Decline Narrative' in *The Future of Hope: Christian Tradition amid Modernity and Postmodernity*, edited by Miroslav Volf and William Katerberg (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 27–48, here 35.

cisively in our history to set all things right and to bring to full consummation the New Creation. The New Creation, which is the climax of the great metanarrative, is precisely the very vision of hope which this generation so desperately needs and cannot find as long as they remain disconnected to God's narrative, the great theo-drama of the universe.

At the heart of Trinitarianism is ***God the Son***, ***Jesus Christ***, who is the apex of God's revelation and the ultimate standard by which all is judged. Jesus Christ is building his church. The church does not merely have an instrumental function, it has an ontological identity in the metanarrative. The Apostles' and Nicene Creed both affirm the church just as they affirm the resurrection of Jesus Christ. This is why the endless nuancing of the borders between exclusivism and inclusivism – such as the fine work of Terrance Tiessen with his position of Accessibilism – nevertheless falls short because, in the end, these are all attempts to build a doctrine of soteriology apart from ecclesiology.[30] Jesus Christ is the embodiment of the New Creation, but he calls us to be the community of the New Creation and to demonstrate to the world that salvation is not merely something declared *of* us, it is something wrought *in* us. It is sometimes forgotten that Karl Rahner's famous 'anonymous Christians' also implies anonymous communities, anonymous sacraments, and so forth. It is, therefore, vital that any accredited evangelical theology of religions be Trinitarian, Christo-centric, and has a vision of the church which is not merely the aggregate number of all justified individuals, but the sign and promise of a full community living out the in-breaking New Creation.

Second, *we must continue to embrace a canonical principle which declares that the Bible is central to our understanding of God's self-disclosure*. God addresses fallen humanity not only in the Word made flesh, but in the Word which has been inscripturated into the biblical text. We must continue to affirm that 'all Scripture is God-breathed' and therefore, 'profitable for reproof, correction and training in righteousness' (2 Tim. 3:16). All insights from general revelation, or the particular claims of other religions, must be tested against the biblical revelation and against the person and work of Jesus Christ. Firm belief in personal and propositional revelation is the only sure way to deliver us from the abyss of relativism, endless human speculations or, worse, the notion that religions are nothing more than pragmatic, consumer preferences in a global religious marketplace. As noted earlier, it is not enough to simply state that evangelical exclusivists, for example, affirm the uniqueness of Jesus Christ or the redemptive power of his death on the cross and the necessity of explicit repentance and faith in response to God's mighty acts in Christ. An evangelical theology of religions must be articulated within the larger frame of the entire canonical witness. Furthermore, we should always remember that the gospel is good news to be

30 Terrance L. Tiessen, *Who Can be Saved?* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2004). See p. 35 for a helpful chart showing the difference between a generous inclusivism, which he calls Religious Instrumentalism, and a more restricted view of inclusivism, which he calls Accessibilism.

proclaimed. We are called to be witnesses of Jesus Christ, even in the context of inter-religious dialogue.

Third, *revelatory particularism positions an evangelical theology of religions within the context of the missio dei*. It is the only through the lens of the *missio dei* that a theology of religions can be fully related to the whole frame of biblical theology. Central to the *missio dei* is our understanding that through speech and actions, God is on a mission to redeem and bless all nations. Redemption is, after all, *his* unfolding metanarrative, to which we are called to participate. Kevin Vanhoozer is correct when he argues that God's self disclosure is fundamentally theo-dramatic. In other words, revelation does not, like Islam, come down separate from human culture and context. Instead, God enters into and interacts with human narratives and is, thereby, set within a *dramatic, missional* context. The gospel is the greatest drama ever conceived. The theater of God's self-disclosure is the stage of human history, which Calvin referred to as the *theatrum gloriae Dei* (a theater of the glory of God).[31] God himself is the primary actor, in both creation, redemption and in the new-creation. God acts and God speaks, and human history, including religious history and narratives, is the response, in various ways, to God's actions and words. An evangelical theology of religions should always be set forth within the larger context of the drama of the *missio dei*.

This is precisely why the postmodern re-awakening to the power of story and narrative is so critical. Narrative structures are not antithetical to a correspondence theory of truth. All propositional truths are, ultimately related to the great metanarrative of the *missio dei*. Mega-churches have become so entrapped in market driven Christianity that it is highly unlikely that they will be able to display a grander narrative than autonomous Christians consuming religious services. The liturgical churches are set up with a structure of the church year which walks Christians through the metanarrative from advent to incarnation, from Lent and passion to Easter and resurrection, and thence to the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. However, a metanarrative which begins with prophets prophesying, i.e. the season of Advent, is unintelligible to postmoderns. We actually need to insert an additional season of the church year, which I have suggested could be called Initium, from the Latin word for beginnings, so we have space in the church year to teach about creation, *imago-dei*, general revelation, the Fall, and so forth. Furthermore, we need, at the end of the church year a bit of Ordinary Time carved out for a proper season of New Creation. We must create catechetical and ecclesial space for the full metanarrative. The gospel is not intelligible if our Scriptures start with Gen. 3 and end in Rev. 20.

Fourth and finally, our overall approach to this next generation must be simultaneously *evangelical and catholic*. By evangelical I mean that we are committed to the centrality of Christ, historic Christian orthodoxy and the urgency to proclaim the gospel in word and deed, calling the world to repentance and

31 John Calvin, *Institutes*, 156, 293 (1.14.20 and 2.6.1).

faith. Evangelical faith helps us to remember the center of the gospel. However, we are catholic in the sense that we share a unity with all members of the body of Christ throughout the world. A robust commitment to ecumenism strengthens the whole church as long as it is bounded by the centrality of Christ and the principle of canonicity. We believe that 'the *one* gospel is best understood in dialogue with the *many* saints.'[32] The entire global church brings enormous experience and perspective on how to articulate the faith within the context of religious pluralism without being hampered by the governing philosophical assumptions of the Enlightenment. The emergence of the global church represents a unique opportunity to recover biblical catholicity, which, as the Apostles' Creed reminds us, is one of the marks of the true church.

III. Conclusion

When Odysseus and Jason planned a strategy to resist the effects of the deadly allure of the Sirens, it involved strapping Odysseus to the mast of his ship and plugging his ears with wax. But the sound of the Sirens was too great and it penetrated the wax and only through great agony did Odysseus pass the strait. Jason and his argonauts, on the other hand, heeded the advice of Princes Medea, who suggested that Orpheus, the Greek God of Music might counter the song of the Sirens with an even more compelling song, the music of heaven. This is our task today. We must tell a bigger story, we must cast a larger narrative, we must sing a better song. The day of minimalistic, theologically reductionistic presentations of Christianity has passed. We must unfurl the full metanarrative and engage a new generation with the entire Christian narrative from creation to new creation.

Abstract

Christian presentations of the relationship between Christ and other religions are typically articulated through Alan Race's 1982 paradigm of pluralism, inclusivism and exclusivism. While there have been a number of nuances and adjustments made to that proposal, especially by Paul Knitter, the majority of Evangelicals would continue to advocate an 'exclusivist' position. Nevertheless, greater awareness of the implications of postmodernism encourages a more robust approach that embraces a Trinitarian context, the centrality of the Bible, the *missio dei* and a catholic appreciation of the whole church.

32 Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical–Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville: WJK, 2005), 30.