Evangelical Review of Theology

A Global Forum

GENERAL EDITOR: THOMAS SCHIRRMACHER

Published by

Paternoster:
thinking faith

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A Trinitarian Theology of Religions: Themes and Issues in Evangelical Approaches

David Thang Moe

I Introduction

A theology of religions emerged as an academic discipline in the late twentieth century.[1] Since then, interest in a theology of religions has grown among the leading pluralistic Roman Catholic and Protestant theologians. Catholic theologian, Alan Race's three typologies coined in 1983[2]—'inclusivism, exclusivism and pluralism'—became popular among religious theologians to describe the Christian perspectives on and attitudes toward other religions. These three typologies have been adopted more widely by pluralistic theologians in their subsequent writings.[3]

In reaction to the pluralistic theologians' neglect of the uniqueness of Christ and other theological and missiological issues, some evangelical theologians joined the discussion on a theology of religions in the 1990s.[4] In light of Race's use of three categories, 'evangelicals are regarded both by themselves and by others as *exclusivists*' because of their narrow focus on Christ and their focus on evangelism.[5] Evangelical theologian, Terry Muck, complains that Race's use of three categories is helpful in sorting out different views on other religions, but

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1 Gerald McDermott and Harold A. Netland, *A Trinitarian Theology of Religions: An Evangelical Proposal* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 9.

2 Alan Race, *Christians and Religious Pluralism* (London: SCM Press, 1983).

3 One good example is, Paul F. Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2002).

4 For examples, see Terry C. Muck, 'Evangelicals and Interreligious Dialogue', in *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, vol. 36. 4 (1993): 517-529. Harold A. Netland, *Encountering Religious Pluralism: The Challenge to Christian Faith and Mission* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2001), 309.

5 Paul F. Knitter, *No Other Name? A Critical Survey of Christian Attitudes Toward the World Religions* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1985), 75-96. See also McDermott, *A Trinitarian Theology of Religions*, 12.

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the taxonomy is misleading without a proper description of the meaning of theology of religions.[6]

In light of these three categories, theologians continue to debate the proper subject matter and methodology of theology of religions. Their question is: what do we mean by a theology of religions?[7] In answering that question, Pentecostal-evangelical theologian, Veli-Matti Karkkainen, helpfully defines the theology of religions as 'the academic discipline, which attempts to think theologically about the meaning of religions and about what it means for Christians to live with other world religions'.[8]

Although Karkkainen's definition is helpful in figuring out what it means to explore a theology of religions, what is missing in his book is a trinitarian theology of religion. However, in a later book published in 2004, he does re-consider the role of the Trinity in a theology of religions.[9] Pentecostal-evangelical theologian Amos Yong is right in saying, 'Explicit work on a Trinitarian theology of religions by evangelicals has emerged only recently.'[10]

One of the most substantive and recent works on a trinitarian theology of religions is a collaborative effort by two prominent evangelical theologians, Gerald McDermott and Harold Netland.[11] They observe that evangelicals did not take the Trinity seriously from the beginning 'in part because of their investment in Enlightenment presuppositions'.[12] 'With the Enlightenment presuppositions, they placed the evangelistic work of conversion over the Trinity.'[13]

Evangelicals are accused of being excessively Christocentric in favour of a narrow focus on salvation within the church, departing from a robust trinitarian theology of religions.[14] It is a central contention in this paper that a Christian theology of religions must be trinitarian by nature and that our approach to the trinitarian theology of religions must be evangelical in perspective.

In my approach, a trinitarian theology of religions provides two central methodological themes: the different characters of the triune God within the one Godhead, and their external relation to the world through Christ by the Spirit. If the former recognizes the diversities of world religions, the latter provides Christians with the trinitarian mission model of the relation to the di-

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6 Terry C. Muck, 'Instrumentality, Complexity and Reason: A Christian Approach to Religious Diversity', in *Christian-Buddhist Studies*, 22 (2002): 115-121.

7 Netland, *Encountering Religious Pluralism*, 311.

8 Veli-Matti Karkkainen, *An Introduction to the Theology of Religions* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2003), 20.

9 Veli-Matti Karkkainen, *Trinity and Religious Pluralism: The Doctrine of the Trinity in Christian Theology of Religions (*Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2004).

10 Amos Yong, 'Toward a Trinitarian Theology of Religions: A Pentecostal-Evangelical Missiological Elaboration', in *International*

Bulletin of Mission Research, vol. 40.4 (October 2016): 294-306.

11 McDermott and Netland, *A Trinitarian Theology of Religions,* 46-85.

12 McDermott and Netland, *A Trinitarian Theology of Religions*, 45.

13 McDermott and Netland, *A Trinitarian Theology of Religions,* 45.

14 McDermott and Netland, *A Trinitarian Theology of Religions*, 8-9*.*

verse world religions of the Spirit.

But how should Christians embody the relational aspect of the Trinity? What is the goal of the external relation of the Trinity to the world and what is the goal of Christians' communication with other religions?

To answer these questions, I would first like to depict an evangelical trinitarian theology of religions as comprising three components: confession of faith, communication of faith and cultivation of faith.

First, confession of faith involves a theological reflection on the Christian doctrine of the Trinity—as the Father, Son and the Spirit who created and redeemed the world. Second, communication of faith involves the missiological question of how we should imitate the triune God's communication with the world by communicating the Christian faith with other faiths in a pluralistic world. Third, cultivation of faith seeks the ethical question of how God's holiness as sanctification should be practised by learning insights from other religions.[15]

Putting three components together, I would like to define a trinitarian theology of religions as an academic discipline which asks the theological and missiological question of what it means to be religious and of how Christians should witness to Christ among other world religions by recognizing the cosmic act of Christ and by discerning the cosmic presence of the Spirit in a religious world.

The purpose of this paper is to explore emerging themes and issues in

the evangelical approaches to a trinitarian theology of religions from a missiological perspective. The result will go beyond Race's classic threefold typology of 'exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism'.

The paper has three parts. In part one, I will explore the doctrine of the Trinity and the nature and models of God's special revelation through Christ and general revelation in other religions. In part two, I will examine the concept of salvation and conversion and their missiological implications in a pluralistic world. In part three, I will explore the role of religious cultures in developing Christianity, cultivating faith, ethical discipleship and translating the gospel for a public truth.

II Trinity, Revelation and Religions: The Confession of Faith

The purpose of this section is to provide the framework for a trinitarian theology of religions. I will begin by evaluating the pluralists' approach to the doctrine of God.

1. Pluralist theology

Pluralists, such as John Hick and Paul Knitter approach a pluralistic theology of religions through the lens of broad theocentrism. Hick famously develops theocentrism on an analogy with the Copernican revolution. Just as Copernicus recognized the sun at the centre of the earth, so God must be put at the centre of the world religions.

When Hick speaks of God, he refers

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15 I borrowed some ideas from Netland, *Encountering Religious Pluralism*, 312.

to the 'ultimate reality'.[16] Since God is the ultimate reality, other religions revolve around and experience God through their common practices. With his emphasis on theocentrism, Hick denies Christocentricism. He regards the incarnation of Christ as a mythology and Christ not as a unique divine being.[17]

Following in the traditions of Hick, Paul Knitter proposes a theocentric Christology as a foundation for developing the pluralistic position. He claims that 'Jesus Himself was theocentric and His mission was kingdom-centered or God-centered'.[18] As Knitter claims, Jesus did not think of himself as divine, and thus he may be unique morally, but his moral uniqueness is related only to other religious founders. Hick and Knitter come to the conclusion that the uniqueness of Christ for Christians is only relative to other religious figures, such as Mohammad, Krishna, Buddha and Confucius.[19]

2. Limitations

In my view, Hick and Knitter have some theological limitations. One is the failure to accept the incarnation of Christ as the fulfilment of the trinitarian process in creation. They separate the incarnate Christ from the pre-incarnate Word of God. I argue that John starts with the affirmation that God through the Word created everything (Jn 1:3). The incarnate Jesus is not only the redeemer, but also the pre-incarnate creator of the world.[20]

Another is to prioritize the humanity of Christ over the divinity of Christ and to equate him with other religious founders so that all religions are the subjective response of humans to the one ultimate reality. I call this 'relativism, rather than revelation'. Finally, they prioritize the subjective experience of God of humans over God's objective revelation.

3. Positive approach

Contrary to them, first, I will take God's self-revelation in Christ as a central point of departure for a trinitarian theology of religions.[21] I will study two aspects of God's revelation: God's special revelation through the uncreated, yet incarnate Christ and God's general revelation through created nature. Though God is the subject of both kinds of revelation, I prioritize the former over the latter because it is through Christ that we come to know God (Jn 12:45).

16 John Hick, *A Christian Theology of Religions: The Rainbow of Faiths* (Louisville, KY: John Knox, 1995), 27.

17 John Hick, ed, *The Myth of God Incarnate* (London: SCM Press, 1977), 178. 'Myth,' is defined by Hick as a story, which is told, but which is not literally true.

18 Knitter, *No Other Name?,* 173.

19 John Hick, *A Christian Theology of Religions: The Rainbow of Faiths* (Louisville, KY: John Knox, 1995), 23-24. See also Paul F. Knitter, *Jesus and the Other Names: Christian Mission and Global Responsibility* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1996), 77-78.

20 McDermott and Netland, *A Trinitarian Theology of Religions*, 57-60.

21 In this respect, I follow Barth's methodology. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*: *The Doctrine of the Word of God*, vol. I.1, translated by G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1936), 295. Barth takes God's revelation as a point of departure for all of his theological methodology.

a) Revelation defined

Let me begin by defining the meaning of revelation for a better understanding of this topic. Revelation comes from the Greek word, *apokalupto*, which means the unveiling of something that was hidden. Revelation is not something that we already know, but it has to do with our new knowledge and experience of what was previously unknown. This sense of revelation is noted by Paul in Ephesians: the mystery of Christ known to us by the Spirit (3:4).[22]

b) Christocentric approach

Second, I consider God's self-revelation in Christ to be central for a trinitarian theology of religions. By emphasizing God's sovereignty and human sin, Karl Barth made a qualitative distinction between God and humanity. Humans cannot know God apart from his self-revelation. Any human-saving knowledge of God must be initiated by the self-revealing God through the incarnate Christ by the Spirit. 'Apart from this act, the character and purpose of God remain a matter of sheer guessing.'[23]

According to Barth, revelation must come to us, rather than from us. To speak of God's special revelation, Barth sums this up: 'God revealed Himself through Himself.'[24] For Barth,

the incarnation of Christ is a trinitarian act of divine revelation. Barth regards 'the Father as the revealer (source of revelation), the Son as revelation (actor) and the Spirit as revealedness (empowerer).'[25] This one Lord is involved in Christ's incarnation.

c) Incarnation

Third, the incarnation of Christ is the embodiment and witness of God's special revelation (Jn 1:14). For Barth, the incarnation is a means through which God reconciles us to himself (Jn 12:32; 2 Cor 5:18). Likewise, Timothy Tennent argues for 'the incarnation as a means through which sinful humanity gains access to the triune God'.[26]

In order to make sense of a trinitarian incarnation among world religions, I find Andrew Walls' interpretation of the concept of incarnation helpful. According to Walls, incarnation distinguishes Christianity from the other two monotheistic religions—Judaism and Islam. 'At the heart of Jewish and Islamic faith is the Prophetic Word—God speaks to humanity. But at the heart of Christian faith is the Incarnate Word—God becomes humanity and dwells among us.'[27] Since God becomes human and makes himself known to us through Christ, we come to know and experience the triune God.

Incarnation is the fulfilment of the trinitarian process in creation. Colos-

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22 McDermott and Netland, *A Trinitarian Theology of Religions*, 88. An excellent survey of fives modes of revelation, see, Avery Dulles, *Models of Revelation*, 2nd ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1992).

23 Daniel L. Miglore, *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), 28.

24 Barth, *Church Dogmatics,* vol. 1.1, 297.

25 Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. I.1, 295.

26 Timothy C. Tennent, *Invitation to World Missions: A Trinitarian Missiology for the Twenty—first Century* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2010), 190.

27 Andrew F. Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in Transmission of Faith* (Maryknoll, NY, Orbis: 1996), 47.

sians pronounces that 'in Christ, the fullness of Deity lives in bodily form' (Col 2:9). Since the Father, Son and Spirit (trinitarian monotheism) are one in *essence* (Deut 6:4), so do they work mutually in one mission of creation (creation out of the old: Genesis 1) and of new creation or redemption (creation out of the old: 2 Cor 5:17).

This means that the two indivisible natures of Christ—full divinity (pre-incarnation) and full humanity are the key to our notion of Trinity. From creation through the incarnation and death to resurrection, the triune God is involved mutually. This is *perichoresis* (mutual indwelling in one another). John 16:15 echoes this coherence of the Three: 'All that the Father has is mine, therefore I said that the Spirit will take what is mine, and will make it known to you.'[28]

d) Sinful humanity

Fourth, God's special revelation in Christ not only reveals his divine attributes of love and redeeming purpose but also exposes the sinful nature of humanity. Barth makes this explicit. He states, 'Just as a ray of sunshine reveals dirt in a dark room, so does sinless Jesus expose our sin in our heart.'[29] For Barth, God's revelation brings about the negation/judgment of sin and the exaltation/reconciliation of sinners. If the incarnation is God's descent, his act of reconciliation through Christ is humans' ascent. Jesus said,

'When I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all people to myself' (Jn 12:32).

This sense of the Christian doctrine of trinitarian monotheism is in contrast to the Islamic doctrine of *tawhid* (absolute monotheism). 'Allah does not reveal Himself, He only reveals His will. Thus, the word, Islam means to submit to the will of Allah.'[30] Unlike an absolute Allah, a triune God chooses himself in the incarnate form of Christ not only to reveal his redeeming will, but also to reveal his trinitarian nature of personhood and relation.[31]

Recent scholarship has focused on the relational aspect of the Trinity by distinguishing between the immanent Trinity (inner relation among the Trinity) and the economic Trinity (God's external expression of love through Christ by the Spirit).[32]

e) Natural revelation

Fifth, within the economic framework of God's relation to the world, I think that the triune God's general revelation through created nature is possible. My intent is to show how God's general revelation is possible in and through other religious cultures.

In Myanmar, conservative evangelicals never pause to think about the possibility of God's general revelation in other religious cultures, namely Buddhism and spirit-worship. Psalm 19:1 and Romans 1:19-20 provide the possibility of God's general revelation.

28 McDermott and Netland, *A Trinitarian Theology of Religions*, 53.
29 Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics: The Doctrine of Reconciliation*, vol. IV.2, translated by G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1969), 403.

30 Tennent, *Invitation to World Missions,* 80.
31 Tennent, *Invitation to World Missions*, 80.
32 Tennent, *Invitation to World Missions*, 80. See also Karkkainen, *Trinity and Religious Pluralism*, 5-6.

However, I must distinguish between God's special revelation in and through Christ and God's general revelation in and through nature. Through the former, we have a saving knowledge of God. Through the latter, we have a natural knowledge of God.

John Calvin rightly argues that 'God the Creator can be known through his created order. But God the Redeemer is known only through the uncreated and incarnated Christ.'[33] Noted American evangelical theologian, Jonathan Edwards, agreed with Calvin and argues further that 'nature points to only God the Creator, not God the Redeemer, and that knowledge of the former is insufficient for salvation'.[34]

In line with Calvin and Edwards, it is fair to note that other religions may have no saving knowledge of God's special revelation as attested in the Bible, but they certainly have natural knowledge of God because God continues to reveal himself to them through their cultures. God's incarnational revelation is not only an event, but also a dynamic process. The role of the Spirit is crucial to God's dynamic process of general revelation.

f) Pneumatocentric approach

Sixth, building his pneumatological insights on Acts 2:17 (the Spirit-poured-out-on all flesh) as the model for a pneumatological theology of religions, Yong explores possible ways to *discern*

the 'cosmic presence and activity of the Spirit in other religions'.[35] In reference to Irenaeus' metaphor of the Son and the Spirit as two hands of the Father,[36] Yong emphasizes the interrelation between the Word (Jn 1:14) and the Spirit (Acts 2:17) in God's economic act and presence of general revelation in other religions.[37]

I argue that a new understanding and acknowledgement of the interrelation between the incarnate work of Christ and the universal presence and activity of the Spirit in the whole world, including other religious cultures, could overcome a misunderstanding of Race's classic threefold typology of exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism.

Yong is right to insist on the interrelation between the Son and the Spirit, because not only does the Son send the Spirit, but also the Spirit enables us to understand Christ. To hold their mutual bond in one essence, Yong said, 'The Spirit is the Spirit of Jesus.'[38] However, I hesitate to accept his position of pneumatology as a starting point for a trinitarian theology of religions.[39]

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33 Noted in McDermott and Netland, *A Trinitarian Theology of Religions*, 91. See John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, edited by John T. McNeil (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster, 1960), 1.5.

34 McDermott and Netland, *A Trinitarian Theology of Religions*, 92.

35 Amos Yong, *Discerning the Spirit (s)* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2000).

36 Amos Yong, *Beyond the Impasse: Toward a Pneumatological Theology of Religions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003), 43.

37 Amos Yong, 'Toward a Trinitarian Theology of Religions: A Pentecostal-Evangelical and Missiological Elaboration', in *International Bulletin of Mission Research*, Vol. 40. 4 (October 2016): 294-306 (here pp. 297-300).

38 Yong, *Beyond the Impasse,* 187.

39 Yong, *Beyond the Impasse*, 103.

4. Methodological Questions: Two Starting Points

Finally, there is some debate among theologians of religions today over the methodological questions of whether we should begin with Christology or with Pneumatology for a trinitarian theology of religions. We have to use a Trinitarian Christology as a starting point for a Trinitarian theology of religions because we know who God is and what his saving purpose is through Christ. This does not mean that we should exclude Pneumatology. If we hold the interrelation between the Word and the Spirit in a pluralistic world, there is no room for excluding Pneumatology. However, it is true that in the past, Christian theologians paid little attention to Pneumatology for some reason.

I argue that a trinitarian theology of religions must stress the need of interrelation between the Son and the Spirit. If Jesus tells us who God is in terms of his full divinity and full humanity, the Spirit tells us where God is in terms of his universal presence both in church and in society. Thus, we will certainly use pneumatology as a media of God's general revelation of universal work and mysterious presence in other religions.

Some conservative evangelicals in Myanmar mistakenly believe that the Spirit is at work only where people already acknowledge the lordship of Christ within the church. I must argue against this claim and contend that the cosmic Spirit is at work for God's general revelation everywhere even before other faiths acknowledge Christ.[40]

This is God's prevenient grace. To acknowledge God's general revelation of prevenient grace, I would further argue that other religious cultures pave the way for the saving gospel.

To relate this to my own Chin ethnic context, I am proud to show how the Chin practice of spirit-worship and sacrificial rites paved the way for the gospel of Jesus' atonement. When missionaries preached the gospel of Christ, their hearers readily accepted Christ as their Lord and Saviour who died for them. Today, the Chins represent the country's highest percentage of Christian population. Hence, Jesus' sacrificial atonement by blood is scandalous to the Burmese Buddhist doctrine of *ahimsa* (non-violence).[41]

In sum, God is a revelatory God and Jesus is the witness of the Trinity. I will now discuss the Trinitarian act of salvation and the role of the church as a trinitarian witness among other religions.

III Salvation, Conversion and Social Justice: The Communication of Faith

My aim is to combine a doctrine of the economic Trinity and a doctrine of salvation. Mark Heim helpfully does this by defining 'salvation as a relation of communion with God and other creatures or religious outsiders'.[42] I take up

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40 Yong, *Discerning the Spirit (s)*, 70.

41 For a fuller account, see my article, David Thang Moe, 'Nat-Worship and Paul Tillich: Contextualizing A Correlational Theology of Religions and Cultures in Myanmar,' in *Toronto Journal of Theology,* vol. 31.1 (Spring 2015): 123-136.

42 S. Mark Heim, *The Depths of the Riches*: *A Trinitarian Theology of Religious Ends* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), 49.

the relational aspect of the economic Trinity and salvation as communion with God and with other creatures as a point of departure for communicating the Christian faith to other religious outsiders.

Just as the triune God is in relation to us by self-giving love through Christ, Christians ought to be in relation to each other in the church and also to be in relation to religious outsiders in society by love. However, I do not follow Heim's pluralistic concept of multiple salvations by multiple saviours because 'he makes religious pluralism more pluralistic'.[43]

In my opinion, Heim views a trinitarian theology of religions through the lens of postmodernism. Postmodernism teaches us that there is no absolute truth but there are only multiple truths, and that Jesus is one of many truths. In other words, Jesus is not the only Saviour. Salvation can be found outside Christ.

Heim puts a Christian concept of salvation alongside the Islamic concept of salvation as submission, the Buddhist concept of enlightenment, and the Hindu concept of moksa. He believes there are multiple salvations. Thus, he uses the word 'salvations' in the plural, rather than the word 'salvation' in the singular. He comes to the conclusion that all religions arrive at multiple and different goals by multiple ways of salvation.[44] Interestingly enough, Heim replaces Hick and Knitter's pluralistic stance of *one* common goal by different

paths[45] with the postmodern stance of multiple goals by multiple paths.

The three of them, along with other pluralists, reject the idea that salvation is found only in Christ and propose the acceptance model as the ground for true interreligious dialogue. For them, the goal of interreligious dialogue is to respect and accept other religions regardless of differences and to see the differences not necessarily as the sources of conflicts, but as the sources of complementarinesses by compromise.[46]

1. The uniqueness of Christ

In their communication with other religions, evangelicals, unlike pluralists, have always been earnest about trusting in the salvation that Christ brings. Evangelicals have taken the preaching of the gospel of salvation as their first priority. Because of this, evangelicals could be understood as the 'gospel-people'.

An evangelical trinitarian theology of religions must affirm the uniqueness of Christ. Jesus is the only and one Saviour for all (Jn 14:6; Acts 4:12). Jesus is not just one of many lights, but he is the only salvific light of the world (Jn 8:12). Jesus is not just one of multiple truths, but he is the only truth by which other religious truths must be judged and transformed by the power of the Spirit.

Historically, the Lausanne Covenant took the first two texts as the foundations for affirming 'Jesus as the only Saviour and the one mediator between

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43 Karkkainen, *Trinity and Religious Pluralism*, 134.
44 Heim, *The Depths of the Riches*, 175.

45 Knitter, *Jesus and The Other Names,* 61-83.
46 Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions*, 109-191.

God and humans, and there is no other name'.[47] The Mission and Evangelism Conference of the WCC held at San Antonio in 1989 also made a statement about the uniqueness of Christ: 'We cannot point to any other way than Jesus Christ, at the same time, we cannot set limits to the saving power of God.'[48] Christopher Wright summarizes well;

> Salvation belongs to God alone; is initiated by His grace, achieved by His power, offered on His terms; secured by His promises; guaranteed by His sovereignty. God is the sole subject of saving us from the power of sin. Salvation is the result of no action of ours other than that of asking and accepting it from God.[49]

2. Multidimensional aspect of salvation

Wright's statement raises the question of what we mean by salvation in the Bible and in a pluralistic world, and why Christ is unique. We have to acknowledge that salvation is multidimensional. The different dimensions are characterized by such concepts as justification (declarative act of relation with God), redemption (redeeming us from the power of sin and death),

and new birth, forgiveness of sin, deliverance from exile, liberation from the power of injustice and healing the groaning world and so on.[50]

Another way to put this is that God's salvation through the death and resurrection of Christ by the power of the Spirit is the fulfilment of what God had promised in the Old Testament (Isa 53 and Ps 22) and the culmination of new heavens and a new earth (Rom 8:19-22; Rev 21:1-4).[51] Evangelical scholar, F.F. Bruce, argued that Jesus' substitutionary death on the cross is the result of Israel's disobedience to God and such disobedience itself is sin.[52]

Radical liberal theologians criticize the death of Christ rather than glorifying it as being central to the Christian faith.[53] Their criticism is based on equating the innocent suffering of people with the innocent suffering of Christ. I argue that the suffering of people should not/cannot be seen as equal to the representative suffering of Christ. Human suffering is not an offer-

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47 John Stott, *The Lausanne Covenant: An Exposition and Commentary* (Minneapolis, MN: World Wide Publication, 1975), 14.

48 Fredrick R. Wilson, ed, *The San Antonio Report—Your Will Be Done: Mission in Christ's Way* (Geneva: WCC, 1990).

49 Christopher J.H. Wright, 'Salvation Belongs to Our God,' in *Evangelical Interfaith Dialogue*, vol. 1.4. (2010): 3. See also Christopher J.H Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 265-288.

50 Wright, 'Salvation Belongs to God', 265-288. For a broad discussion of salvation, see also Joel B. Green, *Why Salvation? Reframing New Testament Theology* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2014).

51 McDermott and Netland, *A Trinitarian Theology of Religions*, 153.

52 E.K. Simpson, F.F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Ephesians and Colossians*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1982), 215-216. To say that Israel's disobedience is sin, see also Patrick D. Miller, *Sin and Judgment in Prophets: Stylistic and Theological Analysis* (Chicago, IL: Scholars, 1982), 22.

53 Among many books, see Marit Trealstad, ed, *Cross Examinations: Reading on the Meaning of the Cross Today* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 2006).

ing to God and it is not required of us to suffer either.

The contrast between the suffering of people and the suffering of Jesus is that the latter is God's purpose for salvation, while the former is not. This does not mean that the suffering of people is of no importance to God. To this I will return. What I would like to stress here is the interrelation between the substitutionary character of Jesus' atonement and the consequence of the *Christus Victor* theme for an evangelical trinitarian theology of religions.

Evangelicals emphasize that it is through the substitutionary death of Christ that God forgives, declares us righteous, and reconciles us with himself (Rom 5:8-10; 2 Cor 5:18; Heb 9:15-22) and it is through the resurrection that salvation results in the defeat of evil and death and culminates in new life.[54] Apocalyptically, the resurrection of Christ is the beginning of new life and hope in God (Rom 15:13).

Jürgen Moltmann takes up the resurrection of Christ as a point of departure for his entire theology.[55] Moltmann's theology of hope must be endorsed by evangelicals for a larger discussion on the death of Christ and his saving power in a post-resurrection mission. More interestingly, Moltmann's theology of social Trinity[56] could enrich an evangelical commitment to the socio-political and religious engagement with other faiths in a post-resurrection age.

3. Mission

In the intermediate age between the resurrection and the *parousia* of Christ, the mission task of the church is to witness to what the triune God has done through the death and resurrection of Christ by the power of the Spirit. If the death and resurrection of Christ is the saving theme, the whole world is the scope of the mission of church. By referring to the mission of church, I do not mean to separate it from the mission of God (*missio Dei*). Rather they are interrelated. Just as Christ is the visible witness of the triune God, the mission of church is the witness of the mission of the triune God.[57]

The interrelation of the apostolic mission of the church and the incarnational and universal mission of the triune God is grounded in two Bible texts: John 20:21-22 and Acts 1:8. These two texts raise the mission question of what we mean by the Christian apostolic witnesses among other religions in a pluralistic world.

4. Witness—verbal word and visible work

In order to achieve my goal, I argue that the word 'witness' needs to be

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54 Mark Noll, 'What is Evangelical?' In *Oxford Handbook of Evangelical Theology*, ed. Gerald R. McDermott (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010): 19-32. For the central of the resurrection of Christ, see also N.T. Wright, *Evil and the Justice of God* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2013), 135-145.

55 Jürgen Moltmann, *A Theology of Hope* (London: SCM, 1967).

56 Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the King-*

dom: The Doctrine of God, trans. Margaret Kohl (London: SCM Press, 1981), 150. Moltmann uses 'social Trinity' in lieu of 'economic Trinity.'

57 Tennent, *Invitation to World Missions,* 487-490.

understood in terms of both verbal proclaiming of the saving gospel of Christ and of the visible embodiment of the kingdom of God. I call the former 'verbal witness' and the latter 'visible witness'. In other words, we must put faith alongside practice.

James reminds us that 'faith without works is dead' (Jas 2:26b). Likewise, Lessie Newbigin was right when he said; 'the mission of Jesus was not only to proclaim the kingdom of God (word), but also to embody the presence of God's kingdom in His own person' (work).[58]

Central to the mission concept of proclaiming the gospel in word and embodying it in work is the idea that we preach and actualize salvation as good news among other religions. In his book, *Simply Good News*, Tom Wright explores the idea of why the gospel is news and what makes it good. For him, to claim the gospel as 'good news' is not simply about going to heaven, but about God's rescuing and redeeming us from the power of sin and death through Christ by the power of the Spirit.[59]

In line with Wright, I would further argue that proclaiming the gospel of salvation as good news for all people must be demonstrated in loving those of other faiths. Sadly in Myanmar, conservative evangelicals proclaim good news as bad news among Buddhists by condemning them as hell-goers without explaining what Christ's salvation

means for them. In our communication with other religions, I must stress that we ought to be humble rather than to condemn them.

The Cape Town Commitment reminds us of God's love for a sinful world (Jn 3:16) and our love for the pluralistic world should be maintained in our communication with religious outsiders.[60] Paul is a good example for us. In his communication with the pagans, he did not condemn them, although he was distressed to find them idolatrous (Acts 17:16). What is most important about Paul's inter-religious mission among the Athenians is that he did not bring God to them, but he revealed the 'unknown God' through their culture (17:23) and brought the gospel of resurrection to them (17:30-34).[61]

Paul used what Dean Flemming called 'the constructive and corrective communications with the pagans'.[62] Paul's communication of faith was constructive in the sense of appreciat-

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58 Lessie Newbigin, *The Open Secret: An Introduction to a Theology of Mission,* rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 40.

59 Tom Wright, *Simply Good News: Why the Gospel is News and What Makes It Good* (London: SPCK, 2015).

60 The Cape Town Commitment: *A Confession of Faith and A Call to Action* (Peabody: MA: Hendricks Publishers and the Lausanne Covenant Movement, 2011), II.A.2, 34. See also Robert Schrieter, 'From Lausanne Covenant to the Cape Town Commitment: A Theological Assessment', in *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, vol. 35. 2. (April 2011): 88-92; (here p. 90).

61 Along the same line with an African theologian, John Mbiti, who said that 'missionaries do not bring God to Africa or the foreign cultures', I explored this in my forthcoming article, David Thang Moe, 'Adoniram Judson: A Dialectical Missionary Who Brought the Gospel (Not God) and Gave the Bible to the Burmese,' in *Missiology: An International Review*, (2017).

62 Dean Flemming, *Contextualization in the New Testament: Patterns for Theology and Mission* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2005), 77.

ing their religious worldviews (17:22) and corrective in the sense of exposing their sinful idolatry and of calling them to Christ with repentance (17:31-34).

Both exclusivists and inclusivists accept the uniqueness of Christ and the centrality of his death and resurrection for all (1 Pet 3:8), but the latter do not emphasise the need to call followers of other religions to Christ with repentance because they regard them as what Karl Rahner called 'anonymous Christians'.[63] I appreciate the inclusive Christians for their positive attitudes toward Buddhism by adopting Paul's dialogical mission, but they fail to read Acts 17:30-34.

While I appreciate the inclusivists' positive approach to other faiths, I respectfully disagree with the leading proponent of inclusivism, Rahner's concept of other faiths as 'anonymous Christians'. It would be offensive to those of other faiths to be called 'anonymous Christians' without their self-acknowledgment. Can Christians be called 'anonymous Buddhists' without their self-acknowledgment?

5. Salvation and conversion

If we apply Paul's constructive and corrective communication of the apostolic faith to pagans in our pluralistic world (Acts 17:30-34), we cannot deny the fact that there is the need of interrelating salvation and conversion through personal and psychological repentance. Evangelical trinitarian theology of religions has to deal with this issue adequately. As I mentioned above, most inclusivists affirm that 'religious outsiders would be saved apart from hearing and responding explicitly to the gospel of salvation'.[64]

However, Paul said that 'saving faith comes only by hearing the word of God through the word of apostles' (Rom 10:17).[65] By relating Paul's word to John's word (salvation is a gift for all, and those who believe in Christ have eternal life, and whoever disobeys Christ will not see life and will endure God's wrath: Jn 3:37), it is fair to affirm that human response is necessary for God's salvation. To put it at its simplest, salvation is to be understood as God's free gift to all humans, and as a result of human response.

During his public ministry, Jesus called people to repent and believe in the gospel (Mk 1:15; Lk 4:17). Peter also urged the people to repent and to be baptized in the name of Jesus in his sermon at Pentecost (Acts 2:28; 3:29). Repentance involves the idea of converting from one's former way of sinful and idolatrous life (Acts 17:31-34), from darkness to light, from the power of Satan to God and following Christ (Acts 26:18).[66]

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63 Karl Rahner, 'Christianity and the Non-Christian Religions,' in *Theological Investigations*, vols. 5, trans. Karl H. Kruger (Baltimore, MD: Helicon, 1966), 115-134. Karl Rahner, 'Anonymous Christians,' in *Theological Investigation*, vols. 6, trans. Karl Kruger (Baltimore, MD: Helicon, 1969) 390-398.

64 John Sanders, 'Inclusivism' in *What About Those who Have Never Heard?* ed. John Sanders (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 55.

65 McDermott and Netland, *A Trinitarian Theology of Religions*, 146.

66 Richard P. Peace, 'Conversion', in *Global Dictionary of Theology*, eds. William Dyrness and Veli-Mati Karkkainen (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 196-197.

In reality, the mission practice of conversion is controversial. In my experience in Myanmar, conservative evangelicals convert Buddhists to Christianity by force. In my view, this is not true conversion. This is proselytization. Conversion comes from the inner power of repentance, while proselytization comes from external force.[67]

I would like to distinguish between conversion to Christ and conversion to Christianity. The former, the goal of communication of faith, is to simply introduce other faiths to Christ, while changing one's culture is the main goal of the latter. Evangelical trinitarian theology of religions must prioritize conversion to Christ over conversion to Christianity. This is because culture change would occur as a result of encounter with Christ from within their worldview rather than being forced from the outside.[68]

6. Social justice

Finally, converting other religions to Christ is not the only task of an evangelical trinitarian theology of religions. What evangelicals ought to do is to name social injustice as the result of sin.[69] The point here is not to separate Jesus' death and resurrection from his social ministry, but to integrate them for a holistic salvation.

In Myanmar, the weakness of conservative evangelicals is to emphasize Jesus' death without social engagement, while the weakness of liberal Christians is to emphasize Jesus' social ministry without proclaiming his death and resurrection. The result is that salvation becomes a kind of 'partial liberation'. Salvation must be holistic in scope: saving the lost souls and healing the broken bodies of the oppressed and reconciling the oppressors and the oppressed.

Reconciling the oppressed and oppressors is what I call 'inclusive liberation'. Some liberationists think that the goal of God's solidarity with the oppressed is exclusive of the oppressors. But I argue that if God is God of all humans—both the oppressed and oppressors (Mt 5:45)—the goal of his solidarity with the oppressed must be inclusive of the oppressors, as well. God's compassionate act of solidarity with the oppressed and his prophetic act of resistance to the oppressors lead to their mutual liberation.

The oppressed are to be liberated from the oppressors, and the oppressors are also to be liberated from their sin of dehumanization. The ultimate goal is to build a beloved and free community in which the oppressed will live side by side with their oppressors rather than to nurture the exclusive vision of winners and losers that promotes hatred.[70]

Another weakness of evangelicals is to divorce evangelism from social justice. If God's salvation is holistic, I argue that the question is not whether

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67 The difference between conversion and proselytization see Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History*, 51-53.

68 Dana L. Robert, *Christian Mission: How Christianity Became A World Religion* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 90.

69 Noll, 'What is Evangelical?' 21-22.

70 David Thang Moe, 'Postcolonial and Liberation Theology as Partners Against Sin and Suffering: Hermeneutical Approaches in Asian Perspectives,' *EXCHANGE,* 45.4. (2016): 321-343.

we should egage in either evangelism or social justice. Moreover, the question is not whether we should prioritize evangelism over social justice. Since Christ is concerned about the equal importance of spiritual liberation and physical liberation, we, as the followers of Christ, ought to embody Christ's ministry.

Thus, the question is no longer *either* evangelism *or* social justice, but the question is how to take *both* evangelism *and* social justice as the concerns of an evangelical trinitarian theology of religions. An evangelical trinitarian theology of religions must be concerned about the commitment to bring together faith and action in witnessing to holistic salvation in the context of multi-religions and socio-injustice.

IV Gospel, Religious Culture, Ethical Discipleship: The Cultivation of Faith

Can/should Christians and those of other faiths, Buddhism in particular, learn from each other in the context of a trinitarian theology of religions? My answer is yes! So how and for what? I would argue that we ought to witness to the uniqueness of Christ and the universal act of the Spirit by listening to each other with respect to achieve five goals.

1. The image of God

In reaching out to those of other faiths, we must learn to see them first as fellow human beings who are made in the image of God (Gen 1:27) and secondarily as Buddhists, Hindus and Confucians and so on. We must meet them at the deepest level of their common humanity. This demands that Christians must learn to love people of other faiths as their fellow humans, not to condemn them.

By prioritizing humanity over religiosity, Kosuke Koyama helpfully proposes interpersonal dialogue rather than interreligious dialogue as a model for a healthy cross-cultural mission. He said, 'The focus is to be on human Buddhists (people), rather than on religious Buddhism (doctrine).'[71] Though people cannot be separated from their religions in Asia, I find Koyama's model helpful for initiating a healthy conversation between Christians and Buddhists as neighbours.

2. Preparing for the gospel

Since those of other faiths are made in the image of God, their culture paves the way for the gospel. The *praeparatio evangelica* requires the evangelical behaviour of cultural appreciation and relating the gospel to Buddhists through their doctrine of *dharma*. Buddhists have a natural knowledge of God through their *dharma*. Similarly, Paul said that 'Gentiles have natural conscience of God through the moral law written in their hearts' (Rom 2:15).[72]

Sadly, conservative evangelicals in Myanmar use the colonial mission doctrine of *tabula rasa*, which forces culture to be destroyed in order to introduce the new gospel. Let us remember what Jesus said: 'I came not to destroy the law, but to fulfil prophet and law'

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71 Kosuke Koyama, *Water Buffalo Theology*, 25th anniversary (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1999), 134.

72 Quoted in McDermott and Netland, *A Trinitarian Theology of Religions*, 92.

(Mt 5: 17). Jewish culture paved the way for the incarnation of Christ.

Concentrated on the incarnate Word who is sown in Jewish culture for all humanity ('*logos spermatikos*'),[73] our task is to link the gospel to the Buddhist cultures rather than to destroy them totally. But there is a necessity of 'partial replacement of the gospel'[74] with the Buddhist cultures. This will only come as a result of accepting the gospel, which will transform their cultures.[75]

3. Cultural appropriation

An evangelical trinitarian theology must address the need for cultural appropriation. Is this not contradictory to my earlier expression of cultural appreciation? The answer is yes and no. It contradicts partially but it does not contradict totally from the perspective of total replacement by Christian culture of other religious cultures. The two forces of cultural appreciation and appropriation are in dialectical tension. In this, the gospel is to be what Walls called the dialectics of 'prisoner and liberator of culture'.[76]

In line with Walls, I do think that in our respectful dialogue with Buddhism or other faiths, our first task is not to show the liberating power of the gospel over its culture, but to find the possible ways for the gospel to be inserted into that culture. The liberating power of the gospel in cultural appropriation comes as a result of Buddhist encounter with the gospel. The gospel is not to be transformed, but it has to transform culture.

This raises the question: why should we appropriate religious culture? The answer depends on our view of sin and culture. Buddhist cultures, distorted by sin, have the mixture of both good and bad or idolatrous elements.[77] The Apologist, Justin Martyr, said that 'the Word of Christ spoke to non-Christians, explaining what truth there is in their religious cultures, as well as where there is error in their beliefs and practices.[78]

If Justin Martyr is right, I suggest that an evangelical trinitarian theology of religions should re-consider idolatry as sin, as Paul aimed to do among pagans (Acts 17:16) and introduce a partial replacement model rather than a total replacement model[79] for Christian witness among Buddhists.

I suggest the partial replacement rather than total replacement because of the dialectics of both continuity and discontinuity in their experience of the mystery of the Trinity. Buddhists must discontinue the worship of the idolatrous image of the Buddha, but they may certainly continue using some of their ethical teachings, such as the eightfold path of threefold principle—

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73 Noted in Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions*, 62-63. *Logos Spermatikos* is the termed coined by Church Father Justin Martyr.

74 Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions*, 19-22.

75 For a similar concept, see Richard H. Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), 190-229. Niebuhr argued that Christ must transform culture.

76 Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History*, 3.

77 McDermott and Netland, *A Trinitarian Theology of Religions,* 206.

78 McDermott and Netland, *A Trinitarian Theology of Religions*, 118.

79 Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions*, 19-49.

morality, mediation and wisdom—for translating the gospel. This must necessarily lead me to re-appropriate Hendrick Kraemer's premature proposal of the 'radical discontinuity between the Christian faiths and other faiths'.[80]

Theologians, especially Barthians argue against Kraemer's misinterpretation of Barth's dialectical theology of divine revelation and human religion. In his *Church Dogmatics*, volume 1, Barth regards 'divine revelation as the abolition of religion and religion as unbelief'.[81] To be sure, Kraemer fails to acknowledge the reality that Barth uses the German *Aufhebung* to describe divine revelation as the abolition of religion and religion as unbelief (or faithlessness).

According to Barth, *Aufhebung* has double dialectical meanings— 'sublation and elevation'.[82] In light of *Aufhebung*, God's revelation not only exposes and negates the sinful nature of religion, but also elevates, exalts/ transforms it. Thus, for Barth, divine revelation does not destroy religion completely without exalting it. Barth said;

We do not need to delete anything from the admission that in His revelation, God is present in the world of human religion. What we have to discern is that God present in the world and God's elevation of religion is seen where God's transforming activity results in the Christian religion becoming a true religion.[83]

It is clear from Barth's statement that there is the dialectics of discontinuity and continuity between Christian faith and other faiths. Once other faiths become Christian faiths or what Barth called 'true religions', by the power of the Spirit, some little truths, lights, values of their former religions could help them develop their transforming lives.[84]

4. Religious values and translating the gospel

An evangelical trinitarian theology of religions should also think of the indispensability of other religious values for translating the gospel and developing local Christianity. Local Christianity is to be built upon the local culture. Two champions of world Christianity, Andrew Walls and Lamin Sanneh[85] advance the universality of the gospel

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80 Hendrick Kraemer, *The Christian Message in a non-Christian World* (London: Edinburgh House Press, 1938), 113. For the critique of Kraemer's confrontational position, see also Timothy C. Tennent, in 'Post-Modernity, the Paradigm and the Pre-Eminence of Christ,' in *the 2014 Laing Lecture*, (London: London School of Theology, 2014), 2-3.

81 Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics: The Doctrine of the Word of God*, vol. 1.2, trans. G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956), 280-325.

82 Garrett Green, 'Challenging the Religious Studies Canon: Karl Barth's Theory of Religion,' in *Journal of Religion*, 75 (1995): 473-486.

83 Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. I.2, 197.

84 Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*: *The Doctrine of Reconciliation*, vol. IV. 3. trans. G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T& T Clark, 1961), 97. For a full account of this argument, see my article, David Thang Moe, 'Karl Barth against Religion, not Religions: Constructing His Dialectical Theology of Divine Revelation and Human Religion in Asia', in *Asia Journal of Theology*, vol. 31.1. (April 2017).

85 Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture*, 2nd ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2008).

through translation into all human cultures. By taking the centrality of the incarnation of Christ for all humanity, they distinguished the Christian gospel from the unchanging nature of the Islamic *Qur'an*. Unlike the *Qur'an*, the gospel is translatable into all human cultures.[86]

I relate this to my context in Myanmar. When it comes to the translation of the gospel and the Bible, Buddhism is indispensible because it produces an indigenous culture. Judson, a missionary-translator, used Buddhist terms for translating the Burmese Bible. He adopted Buddhist terms like *dukkha*, *karuna*, and *metta* for expressing the Christian use of suffering, compassion and love and so on.[87]

Recent scholarship has focused on the semiotic translation of the gospel for developing an intercultural theology.[88] *Semios* comes from the Greek word, meaning signs or symbols. The communicators of the gospel and the receivers of the gospel have to share the intercultural symbolic meanings of the gospel. The Gospel of John is rich in using the symbolic expression of Christ (see Jn 1:19—12:25).[89] In this respect, it is fair to say that Christians and those of other faiths experience the mystery of the Trinity and the meaning of the incarnate Christ through the signs and symbols we daily use.

However, when we use the signs for translating the gospel, it is important for us to maintain the integrity of the gospel and the uniqueness of Christ. This is because God became human in Jesus Christ without ceasing to be divine. In other words, God maintains the integrity of the Trinity in his economic relation to the sinful world.

5. Comparing theological divergences and ethical convergences

An evangelical trinitarian theology of religions should address the issues of theological differences and ethical similarities among world religions.[90] As I have said above, Muslims and Christians have theological differences in the issues of the Trinity and incarnation.

Buddhists and Christians have theological differences in the issue of the doctrine of God and salvation. While the former groups (Buddhists in this case) not only do not have the concept of creator, but they also believe in salvation as a kind of liberation by works (or an enlightenment in a Buddhist sense), Christians have the doctrine of God the creator and redeemer and think of salvation as a divine gift by grace (Eph 2:8).

Despite their theological differences, they have ethical similarities. For example, Christians have much to learn from Muslims about their devotional prayer (*Salat*). Too often, many Christians are too lazy to pray. Like

86 Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History*, 47.

87 La Seng Dingrin, 'Is Buddhism Indispensible in Cross-Cultural Appropriation of Christianity in Burma?' in *Buddhist-Christian Studies*, vol. 29. (2009): 3-22.

88 Robert J. Schrieter, *Constructing Local Theologies* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1985), 34.

89 See Craig K. Koester, *Symbolism in the Fourth Gospel: Meaning, Mystery and Community*, 2nd. (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 2003).

90 McDermott and Netland, *A Trinitarian Theology of Religions*, 193.

devoted Muslims, Christians should reconsider prayer to be central to their spiritual and ethical journeys of faith in a right relation to God.[91]

If Muslims could teach Christians to be the better prayer-persons in their spiritual relation with God, Buddhists could teach Christians to become more moral disciples of Christ in their relation with their neighbours. God's commandments in the Bible can be summarized in twofold ethics: 'loving God and loving neighbours' (Mt 22:36-40). This echoes the holiness code in the Old Testament. 'Be holy as I am holy' (Lev 11:44). The ethics of Christians is to reflect the holy nature of God.

Reflecting the holy nature of the Trinity is all about moral virtue in our relation to others. In 1 Peter, the apostle uses the holiness code in four imperatives: set your hope (1:13); be holy (1:15); conduct yourself with fear (1:17) and love one another (1:21). Each of these commands or imperatives is grounded in the positive affirmation of who we are in Christ. In brief, the ethics of Christians is to have the right relationship with the triune God on the one hand, and the right relationship with our neighbours on the other hand.[92]

Moreover, Confucius could help Christians know what we mean by Christ's Golden Rule (Mt 7:12) in our moral relationships in family, church and society.[93] Confucius' principle of a mutual relation among people and the Buddhist ethics of *karuna* help Christians to be the merciful missionaries for charity towards the least. Jesus said that 'our compassionate relation to the poor determines our relation to him' (Mt 25:40).[94]

The charity we show to the poor echoes Christ's compassionate ministry to the poor. If we are not compassionate to the poor and do not do charity work for them, we do not really embody Christ who places the poor in the centre of his merciful ministry.

In brief, the Christian faith does not lead to a lawless life. Christ does not save us *by* the law, but *for* the law. This means that moral law plays an undeniable role in cultivating our faith for sanctification and holiness by the power of the Spirit. In Philippians 2:12, Paul exhorts Christians 'to work out or cultivate our salvation'.

Similarly, in Ephesians 2:9, Paul reminds us that Christ does not simply save *from* something (the power of sin and death) but also *for* something good (transformative life into the likeness of Christ). The power of the Spirit and the cultivating power of our faith by learning the ethics of other faiths could shape us to be the moral disciples of Christ in an immoral world.[95]

Moreover, other religious cultures could play the crucial role in developing local Christianity. Christianity

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91 McDermott and Netland, *A Trinitarian Theology of Religions*, 193.

92 McDermott and Netland, *A Trinitarian Theology of Religions*, 203.

93 McDermott and Netland, *A Trinitarian Theology of Religions*, 200. For Confucius teaching, see Confucius, *The Analects*, translated and edited by D.C. Lau (Hammondsworth: Penguin, 1979, 7.23; 3.13; 7.35.

94 For the relations of ethics between Christianity and Buddhism in particular, see Tennent, *Christianity at the Religious Roundtable*, 115-140.

95 Netland, *Encountering Religious Pluralism*, 311.

is to be built upon the local religious culture. Thus, I would affirm that other religions are not merely the objects for conversion, but the neighbours to and from whom ethical insights must be both given and received for developing Christianity in the local culture and cultivating the Christian faith of holiness.

V Conclusion

This paper has proposed a trinitarian theology of religions as the framework for witnessing to the triune God among other religions from a missiological perspective. I have affirmed that the Father, Jesus the Son and the Spirit are differentiated in their characteristics, yet they are related in their inner communion within the one Godhead.

It is important to claim that we know the transcendent nature of the Trinity through the incarnate Christ by the Spirit. The Father sends both the Son and the Spirit as the two witnesses of the Trinitarian incarnation and his presence in the world. Just as God is in relation to us through Christ by the Spirit, our task is to witness to Christ among other faiths as the Saviour, liberator, reconciler and healer of the world.

As we witness to Christ in a pluralistic world, we must realize that God's prevenient grace is present among other faiths and their cultures pave the way for the gospel and enrich Christian theology. In light of this, I have argued that the interrelation between the universal incarnation of Christ and the cosmic presence and activity of the Spirit in a pluralistic world is central to our respectful communication with other faiths.

Let me conclude the paper by proposing three main goals of interreligious and interpersonal dialogue with other faiths. The first is to witness to Christ to followers of other faiths as Saviour and Lord of love and hope by inviting them to respond to him by the power of the Spirit, not by the human power of imperialism.

The second is to use other religious cultures, insights, languages and ethics for developing and cultivating Christian theology and morality without compromising the truth of the gospel.

The third is to promote social justice and nation building against injustice as God's earthly kingdom of justice and peace in cooperation with other faiths.

May our confession of faith, communication of faith and cultivation of faith continue embodying the very nature and work of the Trinity (the mission of God)!