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Axioms of Universality and Particularity: A Critical Assessment of Karl Rahner and Clark Pinnock with Applications to Contemporary Mission

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Christians have always had to balance seemingly opposed tenets, such as the sovereignty of God and the free will of human beings, or the already and not-yet dimensions of eternal life. In doing so, over the centuries, believers have plotted paths that safely avoided doctrinal extremes. This is an important task; because all our beliefs are interrelated, we must find ways to affirm both poles of all such antinomies without compromising any of the other tenets we affirm.

Karl Rahner and Clark Pinnock also attempt to hold together two fundamental axioms, neither of which can be compromised: God's universal love for all humanity and the particular expression of his love in Christ's atoning work.¹ Rahner's approach affirms the

ability of other religions to mediate saving grace;² Pinnock proposes the possibility of the Holy Spirit's unmediated application of saving grace to the unevangelized.³ Although their methodologies differ, the two theologians agree that the benefits of Christ's atoning work can be applied to the unevangelized because of what Pinnock calls the faith principle.⁴

Both Rahner and Pinnock argue that it is illogical and certainly unfair to make conscious acceptance of the atoning work of Christ the only way to salvation even for those living in con-

1 Clark H. Pinnock, *A Wideness in God's Mercy: The Finality of Jesus Christ in a World of Religions* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 17; Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, vol. 5, trans. Karl-Heinz Kruger (Baltimore, MD: Helicon Press, 1966), 123.

2 Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, vol. 10, trans. David Bourke (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1972), 46; Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, 5:121.

3 Clark H. Pinnock, *Flame of Love: A Theology of the Holy Spirit* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 199.

4 Pinnock, *A Wideness in God's Mercy*, 106, 157, 168. Although Rahner does not use that term, the basic idea is present in his writings; see *Theological Investigations*, 10:45–46.

texts where Christianity has not had a historical presence.⁵ After all, how can one trust in an unknown source of salvation? Instead of conscious acceptance of the work of the unknown Christ, they say, those who have not been presented with the gospel of Christ must exhibit an appropriate penitent response to God's objective demands that *are* known to them. Thus, one does not have to affirm and accept Christ's atoning work explicitly; instead, that work can be implicitly appropriated.

In this paper, I consider whether Rahner and Pinnock successfully hold together the two axioms of God's universal love and the particularity of Christ's atonement (hereafter simply 'the two axioms') as the means of salvation. I argue that although both theologians raise vital issues regarding the unevangelized, their emphasis on the faith principle, which emphasizes the possibility of implicit appropriation of Christ's work, de-emphasizes the importance of Christ as the explicit object of faith. Unintended consequences include the division of Christ's church into two distinct communities and the compromising of the inseparable operation of the triune God.

Rahner and Pinnock are representative of a broader stream of thought on the issue of how one receives salvation, known as *inclusivism*.⁶ Although

inclusivism is not a monolithic position, I treat Rahner and Pinnock as representing an inclusivist position, each with a distinctive emphasis of their own. After explaining how Rahner and Pinnock attempt to address the two axioms, I offer a critique of their views and conclude with applications to Christian mission.

I. Rahner and Pinnock on Universality and Particularity

Rahner and Pinnock reconcile the two axioms by positing the *implicit* exercise of faith to appropriate the benefits of Christ's atonement. Atonement, in simplest terms, is God's work through Jesus Christ, which culminated in his death on the cross for the redemption of creation. Let us consider precisely how Rahner and Pinnock attempt to apply the redemptive work of Christ on the cross to sinners.⁷

1. Rahner: Structural Inclusivism

Peter Schineller makes a helpful distinction between exclusivism and Rahner's version of inclusivism. He observes that whereas exclusivists see Christ and the church as both constitutive (i.e. indispensable and normative)

inclusivism and restrictivist inclusivism, in his book *Christianity and World Religions: Disputed Questions in the Theology of Religions* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 19–25.

⁷ For further discussion of this point, see David Hilborn, 'Atonement, Evangelicalism, and the Evangelical Alliance: The Present Debate in Context', in *The Atonement Debate: Papers from the London Symposium on the Theology of Atonement*, ed. Derek Tidball, David Hilborn, and Justin Thacker (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 15–34.

⁵ Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, 5:121–23.

⁶ See Christopher W. Morgan, 'Inclusivism and Exclusivism', in *Faith Comes by Hearing: A Response to Inclusivism*, ed. Christopher W. Morgan and Robert A. Peterson (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 32–35. Gavin D'Costa identifies two types, structural

and exclusive mediators of salvation, Rahner, paradoxically, sees them as constitutive but not exclusive.⁸ Rahner argues, 'It is only in Jesus Christ that this salvation is conferred, and through Christianity and the one Church that it must be mediated to all men.'⁹ However, in contrast to exclusivism, Rahner holds that salvation is possible outside the explicit confession of Christ because every human, regardless of his or her spiritual condition, is endowed with God's 'supernatural existential' grace that enables and prompts the individual to reach out to God.¹⁰

Rahner's seemingly contradictory affirmations—of salvation through Christ and the church, following the Roman Catholic tradition, on one hand and of openness to other religions on the other hand—compelled him to develop a new understanding of the church.¹¹ He reasons that since God loves even those who have not heard the gospel and since everyone must be saved through the church, there must be some other way by which the unevangelized can become part of God's church.¹² Those who are already in the process of moving towards the true religion, Christianity, thereby, in Rahner's view, become part of the faith

community as anonymous Christians.¹³

Here Rahner is building on the idea of catechumens.¹⁴ Just as catechumens' desire for baptism is counted as salvific in the event of their failure to perform the act due to no fault of their own, unevangelized persons' desire for the church (*votum ecclesiae*) is counted as salvific. Even though Rahner refers mainly to the Roman Catholic Church when he speaks of the 'church', his proposed group of anonymous Christians refers to people who have never heard the gospel, not Christians of other denominations. For him, once a person comes to encounter the gospel, that person's fate is determined by how he or she responds to the gospel and no longer by how he or she yields to the inner prompting of grace.¹⁵ But until then, the unevangelized theists are Christians who have not yet confessed Christ explicitly.

Rahner believes that theists can be anonymous Christians because grace is available both within and outside the church. He explains, 'And hence we have every right to suppose that grace has not only been offered even outside the Christian Church ... but also that, in a great many cases at least, grace gains victory in man's free acceptance of it, this being again the result of

8 J. Peter Schineller, 'Christ and Church: A Spectrum of Views', *Theological Studies* 37, no. 4 (December 1976): 550–53.

9 Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, 10:31.

10 Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, 10:34–35.

11 Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, vol. 6, *Concerning Vatican Council II*, trans. Karl-Heinz Kruger and Boniface Kruger (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1974), 391.

12 Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, 6:391.

13 Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, 6:391–92.

14 Catechesis was a practice in the early church wherein people who had expressed their desire to follow Christ (the catechumens) underwent a rigorous process of discipleship. For an insightful discussion, see Alan Kreider, *The Patient Ferment of the Early Church: The Improbable Rise of Christianity in the Roman Empire* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016), 133–84.

15 Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, 5:121.

grace.¹⁶

Two assumptions undergird this claim. First, Rahner conflates grace and nature. For him, the natural man is endowed with a 'supernatural existential' ability,¹⁷ an implicit grace ingrained in every human being that enables any of us to transcend our finitude and reach out to God without any additional, external infusion of grace. He believes that the creation is somehow endowed with grace by which humans can respond to God directly through the mediation of the Spirit, even without encountering Christ.¹⁸

Rahner's second assumption underlying his belief that one can access salvific grace outside the church¹⁹ is that other religions can serve as a structure through which grace is mediated. For him, other religions are lawful religions like Israel, since they possess 'supernatural, grace-filled elements'.²⁰ He defines a lawful religion as 'an institutional religion whose "use" by man at a certain period can be regarded on a whole as a positive means of gaining the right relationship to God and thus for the attaining of salvation, a means

which is therefore positively included in God's plan of salvation'.²¹

Non-Christian religions like Israel (Rahner considers Israel a religion) contain errors yet are still capable of possessing a salvific significance. Until people come into contact with the gospel, non-Christian religions serve as a legitimate medium by which they can live in relationship to God in their particular situations.²²

For Rahner, one can be part of God's 'unofficial church' by implicitly appropriating God's grace through available religious structures before he or she becomes part of the 'official church'. Once an 'unofficial' church member encounters the gospel, he or she can become part of the official ecclesial faith community by epistemologically embracing Christ's atoning work.

2. Pinnock: Modal Inclusivism

Pinnock, distancing himself from Rahner's structural inclusivism, labels his position 'modal inclusivism'.²³ He explains that his view 'does not claim that God *must* or always *does* make positive use of religion in drawing people. ... God *may* use religion as a way of gracing people's lives and that is *one* of God's options for evoking faith and communicating grace'.²⁴ But as with

16 Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, 5:124.

17 Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, 10:36–38.

18 Daniel Strange, *The Possibility of Salvation among the Unevangelised: An Analysis of Inclusivism in Recent Evangelical Theology* (Carlisle, UK and Waynesboro, GA: Paternoster Press, 2001), 104.

19 When Rahner speaks of the church, he seems to have two categories in mind: visible and invisible. He says that people must be saved through the (visible) church, but he also says that grace is also available outside the church by which they can implicitly become members and be saved.

20 Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, 5:121.

21 Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, 5:125.

22 Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, 5:127–31.

23 Pinnock also refers to his position as 'cautious inclusivism' to distinguish it from Rahner's version. Clark H. Pinnock, 'An Inclusivist View', in *Four Views on Salvation in a Pluralistic World*, ed. Dennis L. Okholm and Timothy R. Phillips (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 99–100.

24 Pinnock, 'An Inclusivist View', 100.

Rahner, Pinnock's theological articulation is also driven by his conviction of God's love and desire for all to be saved.²⁵

To harmonize the two axioms, Pinnock trusts in the principle of universal accessibility. He reasons, 'If God really loves the whole world and desires everyone to be saved, it follows logically that everyone must have access to salvation.'²⁶ However, instead of seeing other religions as the primary means through which God applies his grace, Pinnock considers the Holy Spirit capable of directly applying the blessing of atonement even to those outside any religious influence.²⁷

By the 'faith principle', Pinnock means that 'people are judged on the basis of the light they have received and how they have responded to that light.'²⁸ To establish his point, Pinnock first corrects what he views as a Calvinist misunderstanding of the doctrine of election. Contra Calvinism, he says, 'Election has nothing to do with the eternal salvation of individuals but refers instead to God's way of saving the nation.'²⁹ He reasons that 'exclusivity, in the sense of restrictiveness of salvation', has no place in Christian doctrine since God has corporately elected all humanity.³⁰

Coupling this idea of the corporate election of all humanity with the uni-

versal presence of the Spirit, Pinnock establishes a basis for universal access to salvation. He recognizes that 'the mission of the Spirit is oriented to the goals of incarnation [and that the] Spirit's mission is to bring history to completion and fulfillment in Christ.'³¹ However, he does not grant any shift in how the Spirit operates even after the incarnation or resurrection, nor does he differentiate the work of the Spirit within and outside the Church. For him, the Spirit's operation continues to surpass the domain of the Church and the sphere of the Son.³²

Therefore, access to grace is less of a problem for Pinnock because where the Son is absent, the Spirit continues to work. Due to this conviction, Pinnock is reluctant to adopt the term *filioque* ('and from the Son') even though he does not oppose its doctrinal concept. He believes that *filioque* tends to promote Christomonism,³³ the heretical view that Christ is the sole representation of God. For Pinnock, the work of the Spirit should not be limited to one segment of history; the Spirit continues to exercise its role of universal mediation even where the Son is absent. In this way, one can receive the blessing of atonement available through the Spirit by exercising implicit faith in God.

Both Rahner and Pinnock indicate that what God requires of the unevangelized is a positive response to the revelations to them. Therefore, the ontological work of Christ's atonement does not have to be epistemologically

25 Pinnock, *A Wideness in God's Mercy*, 18.

26 Pinnock, *A Wideness in God's Mercy*, 157.

27 Pinnock, 'An Inclusivist View', 100.

28 Pinnock, *A Wideness in God's Mercy*, 158.

29 Pinnock, *A Wideness in God's Mercy*, 25.

30 Pinnock, 'Divine Election as Corporate, Open, and Vocational', in *Perspectives on Election: Five Views*, ed. Chad Owen Brand (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 2006), 313.

31 Pinnock, *Flame of Love*, 194.

32 Pinnock, *Flame of Love*, 196.

33 Pinnock, *Flame of Love*, 196.

embraced. But whereas Rahner stresses the efficacy of other religions in securing salvation, Pinnock emphasizes the direct mediating ability of the Holy Spirit.

II. Critical Dialogue with Rahner and Pinnock

In my dialogue with Rahner and Pinnock, I will rely most heavily on two voices from the same pair of denominations as these theologians: Gavin D'Costa (Roman Catholic) and Daniel Strange (Baptist). Certainly, Rahner and Pinnock have much to offer the Christian community in many areas of mission and theology. My focus here, however, is to point out a seeming missing link in their theological assessment.

1. The Separation of the Redeemed Community

Rahner's attempt to solve the conflict between the axioms of universality and particularity by developing a concept of anonymous Christians is a result of his distinctive hermeneutic, which is not without problems. The paradigmatic application of the lawful yet corrupted 'Israelitic religion'³⁴ to the New Testament unevangelized ignores the fact that Israelites were people under God's covenant whereas people of other religions are not. In responding to God, Israelites were responding to a specific revelation from God; Rahner's anonymous Christians are not.

Rahner also draws a parallel between lawful pre-Christian religions (Old Testament saints) and contem-

porary non-Christian religions (anonymous Christians).³⁵ This parallel seems to have inspired Pinnock and many inclusivists to develop the idea of pre-messianic Christians. But again, the comparison ignores salvation history. No Old Testament saints became God's people through, and by remaining in, their pagan religions.

Pinnock, therefore, is rightly sceptical of Rahner's positive affirmation of other religions. He believes that Rahner's approach arose more from his view of sacramental orientation, which even Vatican II did not recognize as a legitimate theological move.³⁶ Pinnock's point seems to be that since Roman Catholics believe that grace is mediated through sacraments, Rahner has gone a step further and treated non-Christian religious structures as sacraments.

Rahner's construal of the Spirit's mediation of grace through the desire for the church (*votum ecclesiae*) falls short of both historical practice and his own tradition. The catechumens to whom I referred earlier in this paper were people who had expressed their commitment to following Christ. Even though they were not yet baptized and thus not official members of the church, they were converts in the liminal state; according to Origen, they had left the bondage of Egypt and crossed the Red Sea even though they had not yet crossed the Jordan.³⁷

According to Alan Kreider, one of the first duties of catechumens was to 'hear the gospel'—which he interprets

34 Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, 5:126.

35 Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, 5:126–130.

36 Pinnock, 'An Inclusivist View', 99.

37 Kreider, *Patient Ferment*, 153.

as most likely referring to learning 'the rules of faith', not just listening to the gospel for the first time.³⁸ The catechumens thus were permitted to go where unbelievers could not go, even though they did not participate in all aspects of Christian worship, as conversion was a long process taken seriously by the early church.³⁹

Gavin D'Costa, a contemporary Roman Catholic theologian, argues that the desire for baptism among the catechumens implies an explicit knowledge of God and Christ that is not present in non-Christians, and that therefore the two cannot be equated.⁴⁰ He argues that Rahner's affirmation of non-Christian religions, *per se*, as vehicles for salvation is not drawn from the Roman Catholic tradition.⁴¹

Is Rahner's idea of 'supernatural existential' grace, mentioned above, biblically viable? The idea is somewhat ambiguous and has understandably fostered different interpretations. J. A. Di Noia, a Roman Catholic theologian,

provides a helpful explanation, differentiating between Augustine and Thomas Aquinas as to how they viewed the relationship between nature and grace. Whereas Augustine tended to place a wedge, so to speak, between nature and grace, Thomas was more inclined to see nature subsisting in, though not conflated with, grace.⁴²

In line with Thomas's vision, Di Noia argues, Rahner attempts to navigate between 'extrinsicism' (the Augustinian view that God's grace is imposed on nature from outside) and contemporary alternatives that tend to conflate grace and nature.⁴³ Rahner recognizes the innate capacity of human beings, by virtue of being human, to transcend themselves and reflect on God. He attributes this innate human ability to divine grace, because grace is 'the direct presence of God, the dynamism directed towards participation in the life of God'.⁴⁴

But contrary to some progressive theologians and other interpreters, Rahner acknowledges that this natural knowledge of God must be supplemented by the supernatural knowledge of God that comes from 'categorical revelation'—an expression of natural knowledge that climaxes in the revelation of Jesus Christ.⁴⁵ This careful

38 Kreider, *Patient Ferment*, 153.

39 Kreider, *Patient Ferment*, 154, 176. This practice of catechesis started after the first century AD as greater numbers of pagans began to convert to Christianity. In the first century, while the apostles were alive, Christianity was more closely tied to Judaism, and thus Judaism served as a catechesis.

40 D'Costa, *Christianity and World Religions*, 22.

41 Gavin D'Costa, *The Meeting of Religions and the Trinity: Faith Meets Faith* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2000), 101–5. The logical stretch of Rahner's claim goes from *to* to *through* to *in spite of*: God reveals *to* and *through* other religions, and he also reveals *in spite of* Christianity. Indeed, such is the argument of Ryan Patrick McLaughlin, 'Jonah and the Religious Other: An Exploration of Biblical Inclusivism', *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 48, no. 1 (2013): 83.

42 J. A. Di Noia, 'Karl Rahner', in *The Modern Theologians: An Introduction to Christian Theology in the Twentieth Century*, ed. David F. Ford (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1997), 125.

43 Di Noia, 'Rahner', 126.

44 Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, 6:51, 9:36–37.

45 Alister E. McGrath, 'Karl Rahner', in *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Modern Christian Thought*, ed. Alister McGrath (Cambridge, MA: 1993), 540–41.

delineation allows Rahner to bridge, in Di Noia's view, 'the continuity between human nature as divinely constituted in creation and human beings transformed by grace'.⁴⁶

Rahner seems to have successfully navigated the polarity between transcendence and immanence about nature and grace.⁴⁷ However, he goes a step further with his principle of the 'transcendental existential', which permits the independent materialization of grace apart from any external divine intervention for all those who open themselves to this mystery, regardless of their exposure to the gospel.⁴⁸ Grace in this sense is not confined to the church and its sacraments; rather, grace is embedded in the fabric of history.⁴⁹

This approach is different from the Reformed concept of common grace that operates on all spheres of life. It is even different from the Wesleyan understanding of prevenient grace. Although prevenient grace accommodates the concept of the universal operation of God's grace to the degree that all humankind is believed to be endowed with divine grace to respond to or reject God's gift of salvation, prevenient grace must point towards the redemptive act of Christ on the cross to materialize salvation. Prevenient grace grants a restored ability to respond to

God's provision of redemption through Christ, not a restored relationship.⁵⁰ In other words, when one considers the role of human action, one must equally emphasize the *single activity* of God.⁵¹ Not so with Rahner. For him, the ability to respond to God is intrinsically embedded in humankind, such that people not exposed to the gospel can also, on their own, find God. Although he would attribute the self-transcending capability of humankind ultimately to God, he also leaves room for an active self-transcendence,⁵² paving the way for his concept of anonymous Christians.

Quoting another Catholic, Han Balthasar, who has delivered 'a most biting attack' on Rahner's concept of anonymous Christians,⁵³ D'Costa argues that Rahner's view on this issue presents the 'danger of conflating nature and grace, and reducing revelation to a pre-determined anthropological system'.⁵⁴ Although Karen Kilby has contended that Balthasar's critique arises from misunderstanding and caricature of Rahner's position, I find his view on this particular point (and consequently D'Costa's) valid.⁵⁵ Rahner, in implying that the natural human can respond to

46 Di Noia, 'Rahner', 126.

47 See Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, 1:287–346.

48 Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, vol. 16, trans. David Morland (New York: Seabury Press, 1979), 40–41.

49 Bruce Demarest, *The Cross and Salvation: The Doctrine of Salvation* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1977), 61.

50 Christopher Payk, *Grace First: Christian Mission and Prevenient Grace in John Wesley* (Toronto: Clements Academia, 2015), 60–62.

51 Kenneth J. Collins, *The Theology of John Wesley: Holy Love and the Shape of Grace* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2007), 76.

52 Simon Maria Kopf, 'Karl Rahner on Science and Theology', *Philosophy & Theology* 29, no. 2 (2017): 327.

53 Karen Kilby, *Karl Rahner: Theology and Philosophy* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), 116.

54 D'Costa, *Christianity and World Religions*, 21.

55 Kilby, *Karl Rahner*, 118.

God without any external prompting of grace, minimizes the transcendental empowerment from God that natural man needs.⁵⁶ For Rahner, transcendental revelation is infused into human nature to such an extent that humans have the intrinsic capacity to decide their destiny. Although some Christians, such as a Wesleyan or an Arminian, might agree with Rahner that humanity has now the capacity to choose their destiny, they differ from Rahner in affirming that such ability is a gift made possible because of the atoning work of Christ on the cross and that humankind's destiny is still decided based on how they respond to God's offer of salvation through Jesus Christ.

Another reason why D'Costa denies Rahner's position, and inclusivism in general, is that inclusivism tends towards pluralism by separating truth—ontology (what is true), ethics (what is right), and epistemology (how we know)—from the mediator, Christ, and his church.⁵⁷ Rahner, in allowing other religions to mediate grace, thereby undermines Christ's role as the epistemological foundation for salvation.

Thomas Noble follows D'Costa's path in critiquing Rahner's separation of ontology, ethics and epistemology. Noble inquires into how the issue of epistemology is resolved if an unevangelized good Muslim or Hindu can be saved without knowing Christ. He asked, '[One may] be united to Christ through the universal action of grace (ontology), and he may show that in his moral life (ethics), but how can one say

the epistemology is included if he does not *know* Christ?'⁵⁸

D'Costa's commitment to the epistemological and ontological necessity of Christ's atonement for salvation is not without its own problems, as he resolves the chasm by appealing to the possibility of postmortem evangelism and conversion. But the point here is that D'Costa connects ontology, epistemology and ethics to Christ whereas Rahner's inclusivism does not. Rahner divides the church into two groups: Christians who embrace Christ through explicit confession and Christians who embrace Christ unknowingly through implicit faith.

We should not allow Rahner's optimistic attempt to bridge the axioms of universality and particularity to compromise our Trinitarian theology or our ecclesiological orientation. What God does in this dispensation, he does through the redeemed community of God, which is the bride of Christ. As D'Costa correctly points out, 'The Holy Spirit's presence within other religions is both intrinsically Trinitarian and ecclesiological.'⁵⁹ We agree with D'Costa when he asserts that '*as far as we know* the conditions of salvation require *solus Christus*, *fides ex auditu*, and *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* [salvation is by Christ alone, faith comes from hearing, and there is no salvation outside the church]' (emphasis in original).⁶⁰ We will focus further on the issue of

⁵⁶ Strange, *The Possibility of Salvation among the Unevangelised*, 93–105.

⁵⁷ D'Costa, *The Meeting of Religions and the Trinity*, 22.

⁵⁸ T. A. Noble, 'Only Exclusivism Will Do: Gavin D'Costa's Change of Mind', *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 48, no. 1 (2013): 66.

⁵⁹ D'Costa, *The Meeting of Religions and the Trinity*, 110.

⁶⁰ D'Costa, *Christianity and World Religions*, 23.

the Trinitarian economy in examining Pinnock.

2. Separating the Inseparable Operation of the Trinity

My most significant qualm with Pinnock's modal inclusivism is that he takes a Christological approach from a pneumatological paradigm. Pinnock's refusal to distinguish the economic work of the Holy Spirit before and after the incarnation overlooks the triune economy in the progress of redemptive history. The Bible depicts the Trinity in such a way that each person occupies a distinctive yet unified role. For instance, only the Son is incarnated, and only the Holy Spirit is distinctly manifested to the believers at Pentecost, but each person of the Trinity is involved in the action of the other. This unique yet unified role is firmly established and specific to redemptive history.

The role of the Spirit in this current age, as far as the Bible reveals to us, is intricately linked to the ministry of Christ. The Bible explicitly commands us to preach Jesus, since eternal life comes from believing in Jesus as Lord and Saviour (John 20:31). However, Pinnock argues that 'the saving grace of God can be effective through a person's relationship to God as creature in advance of conversion to Christ.'⁶¹ Pinnock thus claims that even in the absence of Christ, one can relate to God in a salvific manner. Such attribution of the Spirit's saving role in the absence of the Son ignores the Christological emphasis of Scripture.

Daniel Strange, a Baptist theologian

who has extensively engaged and continues to engage with Pinnock,⁶² points out that 'the Spirit cannot point to Christ where Christ is not known.'⁶³ He acknowledges that in any involvement of the divine person, at any redemptive event, the whole Trinity is involved, because each person indwells the others entirely. Therefore, to know the Son is to know the Father and the Spirit.⁶⁴ However, Strange argues, Pinnock cannot claim that knowing the Spirit is knowing the Son, since in Pinnock's theology the Son is absent. It is *only* in knowing Christ that we begin to know God's trinity.⁶⁵

I find Strange's argument credible here because even though evangelicals have entertained a nuanced understanding of the doctrine of the Trinity, they have unanimously upheld the principle of divine simplicity. The oneness of the Godhead cannot be collapsed into a single entity (which leads to modalism) nor can the Trinity be separated into three distinct personalities (which leads to tri-theism). Where any one member of the Trinity is present, the other two are also.⁶⁶

⁶² Strange's engagement with Pinnock started with his dissertation research, later published as *The Possibility of Salvation Among the Unevangelised*. He again interacts with Pinnock substantially in his *Their Rock Is Not like Our Rock: A Theology of Religions* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015), followed by many articles.

⁶³ Strange, *The Possibility of Salvation among the Unevangelised*, 247.

⁶⁴ Strange, *The Possibility of Salvation among the Unevangelised*, 231.

⁶⁵ Strange, *The Possibility of Salvation among the Unevangelised*, 232.

⁶⁶ Robert Letham, 'The Triune God, Incarnation, and Definite Atonement', in *From Heaven*

⁶¹ Pinnock, 'An Inclusivist View', 106.

Moreover, the Bible also indicates that we relate to God primarily through our acceptance of the Son. Must one know the precise nature of the relationship of the triune God to know God? No. But is it necessary to present the triune God by focusing on the redemptive work of Christ on the cross for others to come to faith? I think the answer to this question is yes. Pinnock, by arguing that Christ's work can save ontologically through the mediating grace of the Holy Spirit appropriated by implicit faith, unnecessarily dissects the triune economy.

Does Pinnock's implicit faith principle concur with the revealed biblical picture of faith? I think not. In the biblical account, faith has God as an object (Heb 11:6—in the New Testament, faith is centred on Christ), good works as the evidence (James 2:14–26), and God's Word as the criterion or foundation (Rom 10:17). Although Pinnock accommodates the first two aspects, he ignores the basis for them. We know about God, Jesus' work, and the role of good works from the revealed text of Scripture. This affirmation does not undermine the role of the Holy Spirit in understanding the Word, but it emphasizes that the Spirit and the Word work in conjunction, not in contradiction. Faith, as presented in the Bible, is never a faith without content.

Even the implicit faith of Old Testament saints like Job, to whom Pinnock appeals,⁶⁷ focuses on submitting to God as revealed to them, not faith without any content. Herbert L. Swartz, commenting on faith in the synoptic Gospels, makes an observation that is applicable to all of Scripture: 'As for the ancient Israelites so for the new people of God, faith means primarily confident trust *based in God's promise and as understood through his Word*' (emphasis added).⁶⁸ Faith in itself is not sufficient to save us. As John Frame puts it, faith is the means or instrument by which we reach out to God's grace.⁶⁹ But in both the Old and New Testaments, saving faith always has specific content tied to God's special revelation.⁷⁰

Can one, in defence of Pinnock, argue that he allows for an explicit confession of Christ's sacrifice, albeit in the next life, for the pre-messianic believers—the unevangelized who implicitly exercise faith? He does indicate that even though all may have the opportunity to repent after death, not all will have the desire to do so. One's desire will be consonant with one's life here. Thus, while the multitude of pre-messianic believers will embrace Christ, the wicked will not change their

He Came and Sought Her: Definite Atonement in Historical, Biblical, Theological, and Pastoral Perspective, ed. David Gibson and Jonathan Gibson (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), 440. Letham explains the doctrine of divine simplicity as the belief that 'God is not divisible into parts less than the whole of who he is [such that] each of the three Trinitarian persons is the whole God, and all that can be said to be God is present in each person.'

⁶⁷ Pinnock, 'An Inclusivist View', 119.

⁶⁸ Walter A. Elwell, *Baker Theological Dictionary of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 237.

⁶⁹ John M. Frame, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Christian Belief* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2013), 955.

⁷⁰ For a helpful discussion of this topic, see Steven J. Wellum, 'Saving Faith: Implicit or Explicit?' in *Faith Comes by Hearing: A Response to Inclusivism*, ed. Christopher W. Morgan and Robert A. Peterson (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 142–83.

mind.⁷¹ Although Pinnock's attempt to reconcile the epistemological and ontological necessity of atonement by postponing the fate of the unevangelized to the next life has appealed to many evangelical scholars, a postmortem encounter still does not solve the difficulty of the two axioms. It just delays the predicament.⁷²

III. Theological Assessment

I have indicated that Rahner and Pinnock's attempts to solve the axioms of universality and particularity fail to do justice to the biblical narrative. I have drawn on other scholars, primarily D'Costa and Strange, in support of this critique. At the same time, I have noted the tenuous nature of solutions that rely on the doctrine of postmortem conversion. D'Costa's concept of a postmortem encounter with Christ rests mainly on the Roman Catholic understanding of Jesus' 'descent into hell'.⁷³ This position, however, has its own weaknesses.⁷⁴ Even Pin-

nock, who also believes in the idea of a postmortem encounter, admits that the biblical evidence for this view 'is not abundant'.⁷⁵ John Sanders asserts regarding 1 Peter 3:19–4:6, a pivotal text for the doctrine of postmortem encounter, 'I am intrigued ... but not persuaded that the text teaches postmortem evangelization'.⁷⁶

But despite the uncertain nature of this alternative explanation, D'Costa's critique of Rahner remains valid. Noble, a Wesleyan, shares D'Costa's view, contending that Rahner must provide some explanation of how the evangelized come to be saved at some point; since his model does not seem to resolve this difficulty in this life, the only explanation would be a postmortem conversion.⁷⁷ Even a Catholic universalist theologian like Gerald O'Collins, who has great respect for Rahner, finds the concept of anonymous Christians unsatisfactory.⁷⁸ Rahner does have

but are the logical outcome of synthetic reading of Scripture. D'Costa must prove biblically that the descent into hell is theologically sustainable for his thesis to stand. However, his claim is unconvincing. Ronald Nash questions how one can defend a doctrine of such importance based on a few debated biblical passages while ignoring clear teaching that death comes first and then judgment (e.g. Heb 9:27). Gabriel J. Fackre, Ronald H. Nash, and John Sanders, *What about Those Who Have Never Heard? Three Views on the Destiny of the Unevangelized* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 134.

⁷⁵ Pinnock, *A Wideness in God's Mercy*, 169.

⁷⁶ John Sanders, 'Response to Fackre', in Fackre, Nash and Sanders, *What about Those Who Have Never Heard?* 105.

⁷⁷ Noble, 'Only Exclusivism Will Do', 66, 70.

⁷⁸ Gerald O'Collins, *Salvation for All: God's Other Peoples* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 259.

⁷¹ Pinnock, *A Wideness in God's Mercy*, 170–171.

⁷² One evangelical who has approached this issue of implicit faith and postmortem conversion is Kevin Paul Kinghorn, a Wesleyan, in *The Decision of Faith: Can Christian Beliefs Be Freely Chosen?* (London and New York: T&T Clark, 2005), 162–87.

⁷³ D'Costa, *Christianity and World Religions*, 161–211.

⁷⁴ D'Costa, a Catholic, anticipates objections from evangelicals like Wayne Grudem, who argues that the doctrine of descent into hell was neither explicitly taught in Scripture nor unanimously embraced by the early church Fathers. D'Costa argues (in *Christianity and World Religions*, 164) that the hypostatic union, the Immaculate Conception, and purgatory are also not explicitly taught in the Bible

some supporters, such as Joseph Wong, who argues that the idea of anonymous Christians could contribute to healthy religious dialogue between Christianity and Eastern traditions.⁷⁹ But the criticisms lodged by D'Costa seem hard to refute.

As for Daniel Strange's response to Pinnock, it is compelling to the extent that one is sympathetic to his Reformed stance. Strange espouses a more classical Trinitarian approach, but many scholars today question whether this is the right way, let alone the only way, to approach the doctrine of the Trinity. Those more open to the concept of the social Trinity, such as Pinnock, or the relational Trinity may be reluctant to embrace the Trinitarian implications of Strange's argument, although I do not see a convincing reason how they can deny his conclusion.⁸⁰

On the other hand, theologians such as Damayanthi Niles and Amos Yong would not find Strange's paradigm attractive because it does not allow the Holy Spirit to act independently of, though consistently with, the Father and the Son. Niles would instead be open to the 'mystery and majesty of

God'⁸¹ and Yong to Irenaeus' concept of the 'two hands of the Father' in which both the Son and the Spirit play distinct roles without being constrained by the Christocentric Trinitarian approach.⁸²

The second assumption underlying Strange's approach is the denial that God is under obligation to make salvation accessible to everyone.⁸³ Strange maintains this position because he believes that the means and the end of salvation cannot be separated. For him, the means is the message of the gospel through the proclamation of God's people.⁸⁴ As far as the explicit biblical revelation is concerned, Strange argues, one is not obligated to provide a justification for the universal accessibility of the gospel, as salvation is offered only in Christ through the proclamation of the gospel.

Whether one subscribes to Strange's wholesale Reformed paradigm (if there is such a thing) or not, I believe that his Christocentric-Trinitarian emphasis can be affirmed. Timothy Tennent

⁷⁹ Joseph H. Wong, 'Anonymous Christians: Karl Rahner's Pneuma-Christocentrism and an East-West Dialogue', *Theological Studies* 55, no. 4 (December 1994): 609–37. Kilby, *Karl Rahner*, 115–28, claims that Rahner's accusers have misunderstood him.

⁸⁰ For different views on this subject, see Oliver Crisp and Fred Sanders, 'Introduction: Issues in the Doctrine of the Trinity', in *Advancing Trinitarian Theology: Explorations in Constructive Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 14–16; Thomas H. McCall et al., *Two Views on the Doctrine of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 13–16.

⁸¹ Damayanthi Niles, 'It Is Time to Dance with Dragons', *International Review of Mission* 100, no. 393 (November 2011): 273–74.

⁸² Amos Yong, *Discerning the Spirit(s): A Pentecostal-Charismatic Contribution to Christian Theology of Religions* (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 61–63. Yong's Pneumatocentric theology follows a path set forth by Wong in 'Anonymous Christians', as Yong acknowledges.

⁸³ Strange, *The Possibility of Salvation among the Unevangelised*, 305–6.

⁸⁴ Daniel Strange, 'Slain for the World? The "Uncomfortability" of the "Unevangelized" for a Universal Atonement', in *From Heaven He Came and Sought Her: Definite Atonement in Historical, Biblical, Theological, and Pastoral Perspective*, ed. David Gibson and Jonathan Gibson (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), 599–600.

recognizes that an overemphasis on a pneumatological approach, such as Yong's, violates the Christological focus of the Bible.⁸⁵ For Tennent, any articulation of Christian theology must occur within a Trinitarian frame, and a Christocentric-Trinitarian approach best accounts for the biblical paradigm.⁸⁶ In making this claim, Tennent echoes Lesslie Newbigin, who was concerned for enabling Jesus to be understood and interpreted in such a way as to fit within the pre-understanding of other worldviews. Therefore for Newbigin, even though he remained agnostic about the destiny of the unevangelized, placing Jesus within the Christian worldview, which by necessity is Trinitarian, guards against ambiguity and upholds the uniqueness of Christ and Christianity.⁸⁷ We exalt the triune God when we exalt Christ.

IV. Applications to Mission

As I stated at the beginning of this paper, all our beliefs are interrelated, so adopting a theological position in one area affects many other views. This is true with Rahner and Pinnock. We have seen how Rahner's view of the 'supernatural existential' affects his concept of salvation. It is also relevant that Rahner lived and wrote during a time when Christianity, particularly Catholicism, was in transition. What Phil-

ip Jenkins calls 'the next Christendom' was already beginning to take shape by the mid-twentieth century.

Rahner, like others, recognized the unfeasibility of the Roman Catholic Church's exclusive claim that outside the church there is no salvation. He needed to find a way to reconcile his roots as a Roman Catholic and his conviction that God's saving activities could not be restricted to the Roman Catholic Church alone. To do so, he compared the transition from European/American Christianity to world Christianity with the first-century transition from 'Judaean-Christianity' to Gentile Christianity.⁸⁸ He argued that this latter transition entailed a theological and cultural caesura in which many old practices were abolished and new ones adopted.⁸⁹ Likewise, he continued, this new era of Christianity, which he saw as being inaugurated by Vatican II, calls for a reinterpretation of dogma.⁹⁰

There is no doubt that Rahner accurately perceived the dawn of a new Christian era. However, to account for the historical unfolding of Christianity as he did overlooks some crucial biblical concepts, as discussed above. The theological reinterpretations in which Rahner engaged to accommodate changing times end by compromising Christian ecclesiology as understood both by the Roman Catholic Church and many evangelical Christians.

The tendency for theological modification in one area to affect other areas is observed in Pinnock's theological

⁸⁵ Timothy C. Tennent, *Invitation to World Missions: A Trinitarian Missiology for the Twenty-First Century* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2009), 216–17.

⁸⁶ Tennent, *Invitation to World Missions*, 223.

⁸⁷ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 26–27.

⁸⁸ Karl Rahner, *Concern for the Church* (New York: Crossroad, 1981), 85.

⁸⁹ Rahner, *Concern for the Church*, 84–85.

⁹⁰ Rahner, *Concern for the Church*, 84–86.

articulation too. His theological shift was so starkly visible in his writings and lectures that one of his students, Paige Patterson, wrote, 'But with Pinnock, one never knows which Pinnock we are hearing. Do we listen to "early Pinnock", "middle Pinnock", "late Pinnock", or just the "contradictory Pinnock" of his latest book on [inerrancy], *The Scripture Principle*?'⁹¹ Adrian Rogers, Pinnock's colleague, seconded this critique,⁹² and Pinnock himself acknowledged a shift in position.⁹³

Some would argue that Pinnock and Rahner became less parochial and more inclusive in their theological perspectives and would thus view their shifts as a positive development, but others are less pleased. In retrospect, we can see Pinnock's shift from a more exclusivist position to an inclusivist view as connected to his loss of full confidence in the inerrant Word of God.⁹⁴ In this case, a shift in his view of Scripture caused him to reconsider other areas and make further adjustments. This fact reminds us to be cautious in how we articulate our beliefs, but it also reinforces the importance of anchoring our theology on the revealed Word of God, even where its statements may seem uncharitable and illogical to

some critics. The idea that salvation is found only through the confession of Christ and repentance from sin may be unpopular in some places, but it is also a core feature of biblical revelation.

Even those who argue that the two axioms must be sustained together without emphasizing one over the other can end up leaning towards one of them. For example, D. Preman Niles, a Sri Lankan theologian, contends that we must hold together in tension the evidence of God's presence in the lives and religions of people of other faiths and our calling to witness to what God has done in Jesus Christ for the salvation of the world and all its people.⁹⁵ But he goes on to argue that it is colonial and parochial to insist that people can find their way to the messianic banquet only through the church.⁹⁶ Niles is seeking to bridge the gap between people of different religions, but his declaration that the Christian church's claim to uniqueness is parochial represents a theological presupposition of his own, a significant reinterpretation of the particularity of God's redemptive work from the history of Israel through the incarnation of Christ. In other words, he does not hold the two axioms together at all; instead, he favours one by imposing his theological understanding.

The second lesson we can draw from this debate concerns the need for our mission to be Trinitarian by presenting Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit. We must uphold the doctrines of *homoousion* (each person of the Trin-

91 Paige Patterson, 'Response', in *The Proceedings of the Conference on Biblical Inerrancy, 1987* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1987), 92.

92 Adrian Rogers, 'Response', in *The Proceedings of the Conference on Biblical Inerrancy, 1987* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1987), 101–5.

93 Clark H. Pinnock, 'What Is Biblical Inerrancy?' in *The Proceedings of the Conference on Biblical Inerrancy, 1987* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1987), 74.

94 Patterson, 'Response', 92.

95 D. Preman Niles, *From East and West: Rethinking Christian Mission* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2004), 7.

96 Niles, *From East and West*, 9, 121–22.

ity possesses the same essence), *autotheos* (each is God in his own right), and *perichoresis* (each dwells in the other). We must also avoid the error of Christomonism that neglects the work and power of the Holy Spirit, for none can come to Christ without the convicting ministry of the Spirit (1 Cor. 12:13). And we must avoid the pneumatocentric approach that in effect banishes Christ to the periphery. Salvation is from the Father through the Son by the power of the Holy Spirit. We must not separate the inseparable operation of the Trinity.

Third, our mission must be Christocentric. This does not mean emphasizing the Son to the neglect of the Father and the Spirit, but a Christ-centred theology is faithful to the biblical text. In the divine economy and in salvation history, each person of the Trinity has a defined and irrevocable role (*taxis*). In this current dispensation, the divine economy exalts Christ. Salvation comes from accepting Christ as Saviour and Lord, 'and there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved' (Acts 4:12).

Fourth, as far as we know, salvation comes by explicitly confessing Christ as one's Lord and Saviour. We must therefore not separate the ontological from the epistemological necessity of Christ's atonement. If faith comes from hearing and hearing through the word of Christ (Rom 10:17), and if people cannot hear without someone preaching (Rom 10:14), it is incumbent upon us to preach the gospel. Going beyond this to propose alternate means of attaining salvation is speculation.

Fifth, there exists only one community of God that is redeemed by

the blood of Christ. This community is formed as people confess Christ and submit to his lordship. Our goal is to proclaim the message of Christ by inviting others into this inclusive yet exclusive community. We must, therefore, be cautious of uncritically affirming such movements as 'churchless Christianity'.

Lastly, as we carry out the Christian mission, we must maintain a posture of humility and dependence on God. As far as we know, salvation comes only by explicit confession of Christ, but that statement does not fully resolve the issue. As John Sanders rightly asks, if we are willing to entertain the possibility that infants can be saved without explicit faith in Christ, why end there? Could God employ other extraordinary means to bring people to salvation?⁹⁷ While seeking to eliminate inconsistencies in our theology, we must also remain humble and open to correction and modification as new evidence emerges.

V. Conclusion

Rahner and Pinnock represent two distinctive approaches to reconciling God's universal love of God for all people and the particular expression of that love through his Son. Rahner stresses the ability of non-Christian religions to mediate saving grace, while Pinnock emphasizes the direct mediating ability of the Holy Spirit. Both appeal to implicit faith as means of receiving salvation. Even though both raise some critical issues about the

⁹⁷ John Sanders, *No Other Name: An Investigation into the Destiny of the Unevangelized* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 287–305.

status of the unevangelized, their positions risk dichotomizing the redeemed community and compromising the inseparable operation of the triune God by undermining the explicit knowledge of Christ as the object and ground of faith. Therefore their approaches to reconciling the two axioms, unless reworked in a more biblically faithful way, do not seem viable.