

## HOW THE TRINITY SHOULD GOVERN OUR APPROACH TO WORLD RELIGIONS

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**Abstract:** *The Trinity is the distinctive identity of the God we confess, and it is uniquely suited to protect interreligious dialogue and Christian theology of religions from heresy. To put it another way, only by thinking carefully about the Trinity can we be sure that the God to whom we refer is not an idol, a creation of our imagination, and that our comparisons of the Christian God to other gods does not confuse both.*

**Key words:** *Trinity, interreligious dialogue, pluralism, Islam*

For two thousand years, Christian theologians have been engaging non-Christian religions, but since the Enlightenment they have often dropped the use of the Trinity in their interreligious dialogue. Some today say that bringing the Trinity to the dialogue table would be imperialistic and condescending. Using Christological criteria, they argue, would mute the identity of other religions by silencing the voice of the other. Other Christian theologians suggest that the Trinity is simply *our* imperfect way of conceptualizing the Divine which is grasped in roughly equally imperfect ways by all the major world religions. So the God behind the Trinity is the same God behind the monikers “Allah” and “Buddha” and so on.

In this article, I will argue that the Trinity is *the* distinctive identity of the God we confess and that it is uniquely suited to protect interreligious dialogue and Christian theology of religions from heresy. To put it another way, only by thinking carefully about the Trinity can we be sure that the God to whom we refer is not an idol, a creation of our imagination, and that our comparisons of the Christian God to other gods does not confuse both.<sup>1</sup>

### I. PLURALISM

The biggest attack on the Trinity in the last half-decade has come in the form of theological pluralism. Its most widely influential version goes back to British philosopher John Hick whose books *God Has Many Names* (1980) and *An Interpreta-*

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<sup>1</sup> Parts of this article are adaptations of portions of chapters I wrote for two previous publications: “The Uniqueness and Universality of Jesus Christ,” in *No Other Name: Salvation Through Christ Alone* (ed. Carl Braaten; Delhi, NY: American Lutheran Publicity Bureau, 2012), 19–37; and “The Triune God,” in Gerald McDermott and Harold Netland, *A Trinitarian Theology of Religions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 46–85. These materials have been adapted with permission.

*tion of Religion* (1989) have had an enormous impact on the last two generations of Westerners trying to figure out who or what is god.

Several times in the first book Hick makes explicit a basic assumption that is at the heart of religious pluralism—that there is a basic sameness at the heart of all the world religions. From this assumption, Hick and other pluralists conclude that Christian missions is both unnecessary and immoral. Hick tells the story of how as a young man he explored world religions by visiting mosques and synagogues and temples. He states his conclusion which became a presumption undergirding all of his thought about religions: “It was evident to me that *essentially the same kind of thing* is taking place in them as in a Christian church—namely, human beings opening their minds to a higher divine Reality, known as personal and good and as demanding righteousness and love between man and man.”<sup>2</sup>

Therefore, pluralists reason, following Hick, if Buddhists and Hindus and Muslims are really worshiping the same god as we are, and if only our name for this god is different, and if all of our other conceptual differences about the divine are not as important as these characteristics Hick has just stated, then there is no need for us to preach our version of the divine to others, for they already have it.

In fact, it is arrogant and immoral to insist on our name for God—the Trinity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—when our name is only a product of our culture. We have put a local, cultural stamp on what is in fact universal and beyond culture. Even worse, they say, we Christians presume that without personal union with this triune God, people are lost—even those who are convinced they have the divine, but under other names. This Christian particularism is obviously mistaken for Hick because he considers it obvious that “all God’s creatures ... [will find] ultimate salvation.”<sup>3</sup>

How does he know? He doesn’t say. He assumes it, without giving reasons for saying so. Yet he and other religious pluralists condemn Christians who talk about final judgment and lostness, and who *do* give reasons for saying so. They condemn all other religions that suggest their way is the best way to the divine. Yet this is what every religion proclaims.

Now pluralists insist on the need for tolerance of other religions. But is it tolerant to declare dogmatically that it is not possible for one religion to have a unique way to God and that therefore every religion that makes this claim is wrong? Since every religion in fact *does* make this claim, pluralists maintain that every world religion is wrong.

Even the Dalai Lama makes such a claim. Gavin D’Costa has shown that while he tells the world there is no need for conversion to another religion because every religion gets you to the divine, the Dalai Lama tells insiders that the *best* way to spiritual ultimacy is by Tibetan Buddhism, and that the best of the best ways is

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<sup>2</sup> John Hick, *God Has Many Names* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1980), 18; italics mine.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

his Gelug school of Tibetan Buddhism. Pluralists would say this *must* be wrong because no human conception of ultimacy can possibly be final.<sup>4</sup>

Pluralism is therefore intolerant. It is also narrow-minded, for it fundamentally opposes any claim to absolute truth. Instead, it insists that every religious claim is relativized by, and reduced to, the historical conditions that produced it. It cannot affirm the validity of those who take a non-pluralist and non-relativistic view. I have argued elsewhere that Christian orthodoxy affirms the existence of partial truth—both moral and religious—in other world religions.<sup>5</sup> So we can and should be open to partial truths among those who disagree with us. But hard-core pluralists cannot affirm partial truth in an ultimate sense among those who disagree with them. They cannot accept any particular claims to ultimacy by Christian faith or any other faith.

For pluralists, when it comes to religion, there are no absolutes. But of course when they say that, they have just stated a religious absolute. Perhaps they should say, “There are no absolutes, except the one I just stated.”

We should also recognize that pluralism must lead to agnosticism. For if all we have is our “finger pointing at the moon,” as pluralists tend to say, then reality can never be expressed in anything we say or imagine in human or earthly form. (To say that this is at odds with belief in the incarnation of the Second Person of the Trinity is a gross understatement.) If the Trinity and Allah and Kali and the Aztec god who demanded human sacrifice are all really the same God, then this God recedes into a realm that is utterly unknowable. Hick’s pluralism therefore leads to skepticism and agnosticism. If he is right, no one knows God. All the religions, taken together, fail to bring us to the knowledge of God and actually keep us from the knowledge of reality.

But what if the basic presupposition of pluralists is faulty? What if religious pluralists like Hick who say that all the world religions are doing pretty much the same thing—worshipping a good and personal god—are actually mistaken?

When we look carefully at what the world religions actually *do* say, we find very different things. For example, the Buddha himself was agnostic about the existence of a personal god, and the school of Buddhism that is closest to his teachings—Theravada—denies the existence of god and persons. Philosophical Hinduism and Daoism say the same—that there is no god. They also say there are no final distinctions, for all is one, and therefore there are no persons at all. This means that finally, in ultimate reality, there is no distinction between you and your chair. Your mind and will and personality are ultimately unreal. The only thing that is finally real is the great impersonal Oneness called Brahman or Dao.

<sup>4</sup> Gavin D’Costa, *The Meeting of Religions and the Trinity* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2000), 72–90.

<sup>5</sup> Gerald McDermott, *Can Evangelicals Learn from Non-Christian Religions? Jesus, Revelation and the Religions* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000); idem, *God’s Rivals: Why God Allows Different Religions: Insights from the Bible and the Early Church* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2007); idem, *World Religions: An Indispensable Introduction* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2011); idem, *Jonathan Edwards Confronts the Gods: Christian Theology, Enlightenment Religion, and Non-Christian Faiths* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); idem and Harold Netland, *A Trinitarian Theology of Religions: An Evangelical Proposal* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

Toto, I have a feeling we're not in Kansas anymore.

The world religions are not doing “pretty much the same thing.” On the most basic questions—such as whether there is a god and whether individuals are real—there is profound disagreement. As we have seen, some believe in a god or gods, and some say there are no gods at all. Some believe reality is made up of things and persons, and others say there are no such things. Even the ones that believe in a personal god have drastically different views of that god, and how to reach him or her.

You have heard it said that the world religions are simply different paths up different sides of the same mountain, with all of them reaching the top or goal. The reality is that the goals of the world religions are light years from the Christians' goal, which is union as individuals in love and joy with the three persons of the Trinity, and in union with the saints and angels in a beloved community. Each of the world religions is its own mountain, and each peak is very different and far away from the others.

Yet pluralists still say all the world religions are doing “pretty much the same thing.” Which means they are not really pluralistic. They say they believe in many goals but actually believe in only one—“reality-centeredness” for John Hick, liberation from social oppression for Paul Knitter, or universal faith and rationality for Wilfred Cantwell Smith. Pluralists believe religion is like toothpaste: brand differences are inconsequential because they all have the same function and end. In effect, then, pluralists deny any pluralism of real consequence.

Despite this incoherence, pluralism has made its way into Christian churches. Long before John Hick gave it formal expression, its loss of faith in Christian particularity—the saving person of Jesus Christ—was being felt in changing conceptions of mission. W. E. Hocking's *Re-Thinking Missions* (1933) redefined the goal of mission as “preparation for world unity in civilization.” Civilization, which has sometimes been a byproduct of the gospel and always is challenged by the gospel, was now to be the focus of mission rather than the gospel itself. In the 1960s some in the World Council of Churches (WCC) claimed that “the world sets the agenda for the church”—that is, that God guides the church not through Scripture or church tradition but through secular trends. A key turning point was the WCC's 1968 assembly at Uppsala, Sweden, where it was said that the church's goal ought to be “humanization” rather than “salvation.” It was at that meeting that what WCC general secretary Konrad Raiser called “Christocentric universalism” was replaced by a trinitarian *lookalike* in which the Bride coming down from heaven was not the *ecclesia* but the *oikumene*—not the church of Jesus Christ but the family of nations participating in democracy.<sup>6</sup> Then, in the 1972–1973 Bangkok meetings of

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<sup>6</sup> Lesslie Newbigin, “The Trinity as Public Truth,” in *The Trinity in a Pluralistic Age* (ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 7.

the WCC's Commission on World Mission and Evangelism, came a proposal from ecumenical leaders for a moratorium on missions.<sup>7</sup>

Today, in many Protestant mainline churches and even some evangelical churches, "missions" means building homes for the poor. That is a noble and Christian project, and sometimes ought to be a part of mission, but it is not what the apostles meant by mission, and certainly not the primary thing that Jesus meant when he commanded his followers to make disciples in every nation; baptizing in the name of the Father, Son, and Spirit; and teaching them everything that he had commanded them (Matt 28:18–20).

## II. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE TRINITY FOR THEOLOGY OF RELIGIONS

It is the Trinity that most sharply distinguishes Christian theology from all other views of reality, and it has been misunderstanding and misuse of the Trinity that have produced significant problems in theologies of religions. One of the major problems in Christian theology of religions has been a persistent pattern of disconnecting one of the divine Persons from the other two, or disconnecting the Jesus of the gospels from his identity as Christ.

A close reading of the Gospels shows that this is to fundamentally misread or misunderstand what the apostles had to say about the Trinity. John suggests repeatedly that Jesus was no independent agent but an emissary sent by his Father: "My food is to do the will of him who sent me"; "My teaching is not mine, but his who sent me"; "He who sent me is reliable"; "The one who sent me is with me"; "Now I am going to him who sent me."<sup>8</sup>

But not only did the Father send the Son—he was also *in* the Son and is revealed by the Son: "The Father is in me and I am in the Father"; "I and the Father are one"; "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father."<sup>9</sup> Both Matthew and John assert that the Father is made known only by the Son because only the Son knows the Father: "No one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him" (Matt 11:27); "No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known" (John 1:18). For the Gospel authors, there is no knowledge of God without participation in the Son's knowledge of the Father.

If the Son reveals the Father, it is knowledge of the Son that enables us to determine if the Father is present. We shall see below that this has implications for theologies of religions that claim the identity of other gods with the triune God. Not only does it suggest the necessity of Christological criteria for identifying the presence of the triune God in religious phenomena outside the church but it also

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<sup>7</sup> Kevin P. Lines, "The Continued Importance of a Mission Moratorium," [http://asburyseminary.academia.edu/KevinPLines/Papers/614483/The\\_Continued\\_Importance\\_of\\_a\\_Mission\\_Moratorium](http://asburyseminary.academia.edu/KevinPLines/Papers/614483/The_Continued_Importance_of_a_Mission_Moratorium).

<sup>8</sup> John 4:34; 7:16; 8:26, 29; 16:5; see also 5:24; 6:38; 7:33; 9:4; 12:44–45; 13:20; 15:21.

<sup>9</sup> John 10:38, 30; 14:9.

mandates the absolute centrality for Christian faith of the life and teachings of the God-man Jesus Christ. It is this story of this God-man that interprets all other supposed stories of God. And it is this *person* of the God-man—not an idea about him or notion of deity, or concept of incarnation—that is the criterion by which we evaluate all other claims to divine presence. It is the *event* of this person’s life, death, and resurrection—not a Christic principle or transformative experience—that is determinative in theology of religions. Jesus Christ is not a symbol of something else—not even God—but the second person of the God whose name is Father, Son, and Spirit. As Bonhoeffer wrote, only the “facts” of the life and death of Jesus of Nazareth can tell us who God is. We know of no abstract divinity or human nature as such; the meaning of humanity and divinity both are found only in knowing Jesus Christ.<sup>10</sup>

The Son’s knowledge is exhaustive knowledge. Because the Father sent the Son and is in the Son, and Jesus of Nazareth *is* the Son, Jesus contains, as it were, all the deity of the Father: “In him *all* the fullness of God was pleased to dwell”; “In him the *whole* fullness of deity dwells bodily” (Col. 1:19, 2:9). The word “bodily” (*somatikōs*) indicates that for the author of Colossians the incarnate Word contained all of the eternal Word.

This is another way of saying that the Spirit’s teaching will never be untethered from the Son’s. For Paul says the Spirit is the “Spirit of Christ” (Rom 8:9). According to John’s Gospel, the Spirit was sent by the Son (16:7), the Spirit convicts human beings of their unbelief in the Son (16:9), and the Spirit does not speak on his own authority but only what he hears from the Son (16:13).<sup>11</sup> The Spirit does this by taking what is of the Son and declaring it (16:14)—bearing witness about the Son (15:26). The Spirit does not speak for himself because he is not from himself: “But when the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father, he will bear witness about me” (15:26). Still other aspects of the Spirit’s work tie the Spirit to the Son: he conforms believers to the image of the Son (Rom 8:29), and by virtue of being the Spirit who “raised Jesus from the dead” will also give life to the mortal bodies of believers (Rom 8:11). Even when working outside the economy of the incarnate Son—namely, among the OT prophets—it was still the “Spirit of Christ” (1 Pet 1:4).

<sup>10</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Christ the Center* (trans. Edwin H. Robertson; San Francisco: HarperOne, 1978), 102–6.

<sup>11</sup> I use the masculine pronoun for the Spirit not because it is unproblematic but because there are more problems with the alternatives. While most of the NT authors use the Greek neuter pronoun because *pneuma* is neuter, the English translation “it” suggests an impersonality that undermines the biblical emphasis on God’s personal nature and risks confusion with, e.g., the impersonal *nirguna Brahman* of Hinduism. The female pronoun would follow the grammatical feminine of the OT Hebrew *ruach* and the occasional feminine imagery for God in the Bible (Num 11:12; Ps 22:9–10; 71:6; 139:13; Isa 49:15; 66:9, 13; Matt 23:37). But it might also pit the femininity of the Spirit against the supposed masculinity of the Father and Son; it could suggest a female God akin to the goddesses of the ancient near East which Israel fiercely resisted; and it could conjure up the specter of a female spirit restraining male aggression, which is alien to the Gospels’ insistence on triune unity. So we side with John, who in his Gospel uses the masculine pronoun for the Spirit.

But it is not only the Spirit and the Son who are inseparable. All three Persons mutually indwell one another, so that when any one acts, the other two are also acting in him. John 16:15 epitomizes this coinherence of the Three: “All that the Father has is mine; therefore I said that he [the Spirit] will take what is mine and declare it to you.” So the NT picture is this: the Father gives all of himself to the Son; the Spirit takes that “all” and gives it to believers.

Therefore, while theologians speak of the economy of the Word and the economy of the Spirit, there is really only one economy for the apostolic authors, especially John’s Gospel—the Father does all things through the Word by the Holy Spirit.

### III. THE INDIVISIBILITY OF THE TRINITY

This principle of the inseparability of the divine persons in all divine acts was developed most notably by Saint Augustine in his battles against Arian tendencies in the churches. Augustine’s rule was *opera Trinitatis ad extra indivisa sunt*: the works of the triune God in the economy of redemptive history are not divided. Even when the Son seemed to be alone in being born to the flesh of Mary, suffering on the cross, and being raised from the dead, the Father was active in all those actions.

When Jesus said the Father and Son would come to the one who loves him and “make our home with him” (John 14:23), Jesus did not mean that the Spirit would be left out: the Spirit “will not therefore withdraw when the Father and the Son arrive, but will be with them in the same abode for ever; for as a matter of fact, neither does he come without them nor they without him... . [For] this same three is also one, and there is one substance and godhead of Father and Son and Holy Spirit.”<sup>12</sup>

To divide the Trinity by separating the work of one person from the work of the other two is to violate the Trinitarian logic of the gospels—that since each of the persons coinheres in the other two, it is impossible for one person to be separated from the other two.

### IV. DIVIDING THE SPIRIT AND THE SON

Yet this is what has been happening in some theologies of religions. A number of theologians have pressed to divide the work of the Spirit from that of the Son. The Catholic theologian Raimundo Panikkar, whose mother was a Spanish Roman Catholic and whose father an Indian Hindu, envisioned “the Spirit pushing the Christian forward beyond what we call ‘Christianity,’ beyond, I am tempted to add, even the institutional and visible Church.” It would be necessary, Panikkar suggested, because Christians tie the historical Jesus too closely to the Spirit: “If we remain attached exclusively to the ‘Savior,’ to his humanity and his historicity, we block, in a manner of speaking, the coming of the Spirit and thus revert to a stage

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<sup>12</sup> Augustine, *The Trinity* (trans. Edmund Hill; Brooklyn: New City Press, 1991), 83.

of exclusive iconolatry.”<sup>13</sup> Jacques Dupuis, perhaps the most distinguished Catholic theologian of religions at the end of the twentieth century, asked why, if the Spirit before the incarnation was at work, the work of the Spirit after the incarnation would have to be “limited” to the incarnation. In other words, the Spirit could be saying new things in other religions that were not considered by the risen humanity of Jesus Christ that inspired the apostolic authors of the NT.<sup>14</sup>

Others are saying that an “impasse” has been created by unnecessarily restricting the economy of the Spirit to that of the Son, so that either the Spirit is considered to be at work only where people already acknowledge the lordship of Jesus Christ, or else the Spirit’s presence and work are determined by using Christological criteria.<sup>15</sup> New attention is being given to theologian Georges Khodr, who recognized that non-Christian faiths should be conceived “in pneumatological terms, related but not subordinated to or redefined by the economy of the Word.”<sup>16</sup> Khodr realized that if “the Spirit is from the Father of the Son, then the economy of the Son in no way limits that of the Spirit.”<sup>17</sup> As a result, the Spirit’s economy is “larger than that of the Son.”<sup>18</sup> In one theologian’s discussion of Paul Knitter’s work, it is suggested that “the two economies [of Word and Spirit] are distinct and perhaps autonomous.”<sup>19</sup>

## V. DIVIDING JESUS FROM THE CHRIST AND THE ETERNAL WORD

If there have been efforts to divide the work of the Spirit from that of the Son among theologians of religion, there have been similar attempts to divide the work of Jesus from that of the Christ or the eternal Word. Once again, Panikkar and Dupuis have led the way. Panikkar became convinced that Jesus was simply one manifestation of the cosmic Christ, the “Principle, Being, Logos or Christ that other religious traditions call by a variety of names and to which they attach a wide range of ideas.” Dupuis agreed that the man Jesus could not exhaust the meaning or work of the cosmic Christ or eternal Word because Jesus’s human consciousness was limited (since, for example, Jesus said he did not know when the Son of Man would return; Matt 24:36) and therefore did not exhaust the divine mystery. So the revelation in Jesus Christ was not “exhaustive” of the divine mystery.<sup>20</sup> According to this logic, since Jesus was human, the eternal Word contains more than the in-

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<sup>13</sup> Raimundo Panikkar, *The Trinity and the Religious Experience of Man* (New York: Orbis, 1973), 57, 58.

<sup>14</sup> Jacques Dupuis, *Christianity and the Religions: From Confrontation to Dialogue* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2001), 181; idem, *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1997), 388; italics mine.

<sup>15</sup> Amos Yong, *Beyond the Impasse: Toward a Pneumatological Theology of Religions* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003).

<sup>16</sup> Cited in Amos Yong, *Discerning the Spirit(s): A Pentecostal-Charismatic Contribution to Christian Theology of Religions* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 62.

<sup>17</sup> Yong, *Beyond the Impasse*, 87.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 91.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 85.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 88, 22.

carnate Word, and the cosmic Christ is more extensive than the incarnate Christ.<sup>21</sup> S. Mark Heim draws a similar distinction between Jesus of Nazareth and the larger divine reality: “The Trinity teaches us that Jesus Christ cannot be an exhaustive or exclusive source for knowledge of God nor the exhaustive and exclusive act of God to save us.”<sup>22</sup> Knitter states, “To identify the Infinite with anything finite, to contain and limit the Divine to any one human form or mediation—has traditionally and biblically been called idolatry.”<sup>23</sup>

Panikkar, Dupuis, and Knitter reflect a trend in modern theology to take Enlightenment universalism more seriously than Trinitarian particularity. Dupuis illustrates this trend when he proposes, “The other religious traditions represent particular realizations of a universal process, which has become preeminently concrete in Jesus Christ.”<sup>24</sup> This is a way of thinking that goes back to Kant, Hegel, and Schleiermacher, for whom Jesus was the prime example of a process that does not logically require the particularities of the historical Jesus. To make the historical Jesus necessary to salvation would violate the fundamental Enlightenment axiom that ultimate meaning must be expressed in general but not particular terms. As Lessing famously put it, “Accidental truths of history can never become the proof of necessary truths of reason.”<sup>25</sup>

The problem for the Enlightenment, and perhaps for Panikkar and Dupuis, is that Jesus *was* one of the “accidents of history.” The particularities of his life, death, and resurrection were divinely intended, of course, but they were not accessible to humanity universally.

But if the human predicament is alienation from God because of sin, and salvation means reconciliation with God, then Jesus’s limited consciousness is in fact our guarantee that God has taken to himself *our* sinful humanity with all its limitations in exchange for giving us his righteousness and Spirit. This reveals not merely information *about* God but God’s own action to include sinners in his inner Trinitarian life. Hence Jesus’s limited consciousness demonstrates not *partial* revelation of the divine mystery but the *full* picture of what salvation entails.

All of these theologians reason that since Jesus’s consciousness was limited, he could not have filled the fullness of the eternal or cosmic Christ. But why need the first clause lead to the second? According to the doctrine of the *communicatio idiomatum* (sharing of divine and human attributes by the person of Christ), the divine person of the Logos in the incarnation had available to himself both his limited human nature and the divine omniscience of the divine nature, even while choosing at times to restrict himself to the former. That did not prevent the Logos

<sup>21</sup> Dupuis, *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism*, 298.

<sup>22</sup> S. Mark Heim, *The Depth of the Riches: A Trinitarian Theology of Religious Ends* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 134.

<sup>23</sup> Paul F. Knitter, “Five Theses on the Uniqueness of Jesus,” in *The Uniqueness of Jesus: A Dialogue with Paul F. Knitter* (ed. Leonard Swidler and Paul Mojzes; Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1997), 7–8.

<sup>24</sup> Dupuis, *Christianity and the Religions*, 193.

<sup>25</sup> Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, “The Proof of the Spirit and of Power,” *Lessing’s Theological Writings* (ed. Henry Chadwick; London: Adam & Charles Black, 1956), 53. On this way of thinking, see Bruce Marshall, *Christology in Conflict: The Identity of a Savior in Rabner and Barth* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987), 1–14.

from inspiring apostolic reflection on the meaning of the incarnation, so that John could say that the Holy Spirit made available to the apostles the “entire truth” (John 16:13), and the writer to the Colossians could declare that in Jesus Christ are hidden “*all* the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (2:3). Dupuis asserts that the Word “is never totally contained in any historical manifestation,” yet Colossians pronounces that “in Christ the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form” (2:9).<sup>26</sup> The Trinitarian incarnation in one person did not prevent the other two from coinherence in the fullest way imaginable.

To imagine that there is another Christ behind or beyond the Christ who was also Jesus invites speculation about some other Christ who might take a shape different from the incarnate Christ of the Gospels. As Martin Luther used to say, the only God we know is the One revealed in Jesus of Nazareth; and we know that the Lamb was slain “from the foundation of the world” (Rev 13:8).

## VI. SEPARATING THE FATHER FROM THE SON

Our discussion thus far has focused on those who have separated the Son from the Spirit, or Jesus from the Word or Christ. But there is a coordinate problem of minimizing the Christian Trinitarian understanding of God by separating the Father from the Son. In interreligious dialogue with other monotheistic traditions, for example, it is not unusual for Christian theologians to emphasize the divine unity and to focus upon commonalities across monotheistic traditions, thereby ignoring or minimizing Christian Trinitarian distinctives.

The matter of commonalities and differences is often expressed in terms of the following question: Do Muslims and Christians worship the same God? In 2007, Muslim scholars from around the world released “A Common Word” that asserted “Yes” to that question based on the following claim: Both religions teach the two great commandments—love for God with all of the self, and love for neighbor as oneself. The Yale Center for Faith and Culture then released its own “Yes,” agreeing with that claim. More recently, Miroslav Volf released his book *Allah*, in which that claim was argued for, based on a comparison between the Bible and the Qur’an: “If what God is said to command in the Bible were similar to what God is said to command in the Qur’an, then this would suggest that the character of God is similar and that Muslims and Christians have a common God.”<sup>27</sup>

So let’s examine that question—whether the Bible and Qur’an contain those two commands. The first thing that must be said is that love for God is never commanded by the Qur’an and rarely even mentioned. Only three verses appear to use unambiguously what translators render as “love” in the human response to God (2.165; 3.31; 5.54), and two more may do so as well, depending on how the

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<sup>26</sup> Dupuis, *Christianity and the Religions*, 159.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 103.

Arabic is translated (2.177; 76.8).<sup>28</sup> Yet none of these verses *command* love—they merely describe a relation to Allah—and they are at most five out of 6,000 verses.

According to Daud Rahbar and others, even if the Qur'an *mentions* love for God, it never *commands* it. Instead of love, fear of God is commanded by the Qur'an. A Muslim when he wrote his book *God of Justice*, Rahbar argued that the central theme of the Qur'an is God's justice, and its most common exhortation is to "guard yourselves fearfully against God's wrath."<sup>29</sup> Sir Norman Anderson, who for many years was a specialist in Islamic law at the University of London, concurred with this assessment: While the Bible presents God as a father or shepherd or lover to whom one returns love, "in Islam, by contrast, the constant reference is to God as sovereign Lord (*Rabb*), and man as his servant or slave (*'abd*)."<sup>30</sup>

If love for God is rarely mentioned and never commanded in the Qur'an, it is nonetheless important for the Sufi tradition, as the Yale Center has emphasized, pointing especially to the Sufi theologian al-Ghazali as the paradigmatic Muslim.

But there are problems with this use of Sufism. First, many Muslims over the centuries have denounced Sufism as a departure from orthodoxy, so it is strange to appeal to the Sufi tradition in support of mainstream Islamic teachings.<sup>31</sup> Furthermore, the Sufi understanding of love is different from what most Christians presume about love for God and God's love for humanity. Joseph Lumbard, a Muslim, reports that in al-Ghazali, love between the Muslim and God is no longer a duality but a unity in which the individuality of the human is annihilated.<sup>32</sup> According to another historian of Sufism, the concept "of God's love as pursuing the soul, a conception which had reached its highest development in the Christian doctrine of Redemption [*sic*], was impossible to the Sufis" because for Muslims God's transcendence meant he would not have "feelings akin to their own."<sup>33</sup> One of the most famous early Sufis was Rābi'a al-'Adawiyya al-Qaysiyya (d. AD 801) who wrote of her love for God but said little or nothing of his love for her.<sup>34</sup> More recently, Murad Wilfried Hofmann has argued that "a love of God for His creation comparable to the love human beings are capable of ... must be ruled out as incompatible with the very nature of God as sublime and totally self-sufficient."

<sup>28</sup> See Gordon Nickel, "The Language of Love in Qur'an and Gospel," in *Sacred Text: Explorations in Lexicography* (ed. Juan Pedro Monferrer-Sala and Ángel Urbán; Studien zur romanischen Sprachwissenschaft und interkulturellen Kommunikation 57; Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2009), 232.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, xiii, 5, 180–83, 223, 225.

<sup>30</sup> Norman Anderson, *God's Law and God's Love* (London: Collins, 1980), 98.

<sup>31</sup> Nickel, "Language of Love," 241. Alluding to disputes within Islam over Sufism, Daniel Brown points out that in the modern period Muslim reformers, "anxious for a scapegoat for the apparent weakness of Islam *vis-à-vis* the West, focused on Sufism as the root of passivity and conservatism in Muslim religious culture." Daniel Brown, *A New Introduction to Islam* (Malden, MA/Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 173.

<sup>32</sup> Joseph E. B. Lumbard, "From *Hubb* to '*Ishq*': The Development of Love in Early Sufism," *Journal of Islamic Studies* 18.3 (2007): 351.

<sup>33</sup> Margaret Smith, *Rābi'a the Mystic and Her Fellow Saints in Islam* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1924), 92.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 101; cf. Nickel, "Language of Love," 246.

Hofmann, a convert to Islam, suggests that any talk of “God’s love” inevitably “humanizes” and therefore distorts what is transcendent.<sup>35</sup>

According to both Sufi and non-Sufi Muslims, God does not have unconditional love for humans generally. Rahbar writes, “Unqualified Divine Love for mankind is an idea completely alien to the Qur’an.”<sup>36</sup> Allah’s love is conditional, expressed only toward those who do righteous deeds. The American Islamicist Frederick Denny warns that God’s mercy, which is offered to all, should not be confused with love, which is offered “only to select ones.”<sup>37</sup>

In short, the God of the Qur’an never commands his human creatures to love him. Sufis have a long tradition of recommending love for God, but their status as “normative mainstream” in Islam is debatable, and their conceptions of love for God and his love for humanity are significantly different from Christian conceptions.

But what of the second claim about the Islamic God’s principal commands—that Allah commands love for neighbor as oneself? Once again, there are problems. The first is that the Qur’an contains repeated admonitions to Muslim believers not to make friends with non-Muslims. For example, 3.118 reads, “O believers, do not take as close friends other than your own people.” Similar warnings include 58.22 and 60.1. In the *Encyclopedia of the Qur’an*, Denis Gril observes that “love or friendship between human beings is not fully recognized by the Qur’an unless confirmed by faith.” Instead, there is conditional love: “One can truly love only believers, since love for unbelievers separates one from God and attracts one toward this world. ... Adopting unbelievers as friends or allies ... is equivalent to lining up on the side of the enemies of God.”<sup>38</sup> This is rather different from the command of Jesus to his disciples to love even their enemies (Matt 5:43–48). Another difficulty is that, as we have already noted, there simply is no command to love one’s neighbor in the Qur’an. So one can talk about love for neighbor in the Islamic *tradition*, but not as something commanded by the God of the *Qur’an*.

So what should we say about the claim that Muslims and Christians “worship the same God”? At one level, of course, we have to say “Yes,” because as monotheists we all agree there is only one God. Ontologically, there can be only one eternal Creator God. Muslims aim their worship at the one God, and so do we. But the question which the Yale Center asks is whether Qur’anic descriptions of God are “sufficiently similar” to biblical descriptions of God, and here our answers will be very different. As we have just seen, we disagree on whether the Bible and Qur’an point to the same God.

<sup>35</sup> Murad Wilfried Hofmann, “Differences between the Muslim and Christian Concepts of Divine Love,” 14<sup>th</sup> General Conference, Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought, September 4–7, 2007, Amman, Jordan, 5–6, <http://www.bismikaallahuma.org/archives/2008/differences-between-the-muslim-and-christian-concepts-of-divine-love>.

<sup>36</sup> Rahbar, *God of Justice*, 172.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 199.

<sup>38</sup> Denis Gril, “Love and Affection,” in *Encyclopedia of the Qur’an* (ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe; Leiden: Brill, 2003), 234–35.

Now Christians and Muslims agree that there is an eternal Creator God and there is substantial agreement on the names for some of the attributes of God (omnipotence and omniscience, etc.). But Muslims and Christians clearly disagree on what this one Creator God is like, and the major disagreement concerns the Christian doctrine of the Trinity with its entailment concerning the deity of Jesus Christ.

Now many maintain that what is rejected in the Qur'an is not the orthodox Christian teaching on the Trinity but rather certain aberrant, heretical views circulating at the time of Muhammad. Surah 5:116, for example, seems to assume that Christians believe that Mary, mother of Jesus, is one of the three members of the Trinity.

But rejection of the Trinity by Muslims cannot be explained simply as due to misunderstandings. For even when common misunderstandings are clarified, it is not unusual for Muslims to insist that the Christian belief in Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as God compromises the unity of God. At the heart of the dispute, then, is the question of the deity of Jesus Christ.<sup>39</sup>

Here, too, the Trinitarian rule (*opera trinitatis ad extra indivisa sunt*) is helpful. It reminds us that the Father's works are not to be divided from the Son's. The Son helps identify the character of the Father, for the Father's character is revealed by the Son: "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father" (John 14:9). If the Son told his disciples that God loved the world (John 3:16), that they should love God with all their hearts (Matt 22:37), and that they should love everyone including their enemies (Matt 5:44), we can infer that the Father has said and commanded the same. This Father is clearly different, then, from the Allah of the Qur'an.

Furthermore, the Christian teaching on the Son transforms even the most basic predicates ascribed to God and the Father of Jesus. For example, both Christians and Muslims say that God is one. But while Muslims insist that God is numerically one without differentiation, Jesus showed and taught that oneness is also triune.

Another predicate shared by both religions is that God is all-powerful. Yet the Son's demonstration that true power is found in the weakness of the cross is emphatically rejected by Muslims.<sup>40</sup> Therefore if the Father is not divided from the Son, and in fact is revealed by the Son, even the most basic predicates of God as understood by Muslims and the biblical God are different. God's oneness and God's power are fundamentally different for the two religions. Hence we must agree with Lamin Sanneh, the great Yale scholar who grew up as a Muslim and now is an orthodox Christian, that affirming the sameness of the Islamic understanding of God and the biblical God "is adequate insofar as there is only one God, but

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<sup>39</sup> See Kenneth Cragg, *Jesus and the Muslim: An Exploration* (Oxford: Oneworld, 1999); Geoffrey Parrinder, *Jesus in the Qur'an*; and Neal Robinson, *Christ in Islam and Christianity* (Albany, NY: State University of New York, 1991).

<sup>40</sup> This idea of the Son transforming the most basic predicates which the Islamic and Christian conceptions of God share was suggested to us by Timothy C. Tennent, *Theology in the Context of World Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 40–41.

inadequate with respect to God's character, on which hang matters of commitment and identity."<sup>41</sup>

## VII. SETTING ASIDE TRINITARIAN CRITERIA

As I have suggested, some Christian theologians who recognize the triune character of the Christian God nonetheless regard the use of this name in interreligious dialogue as "imperialistic" and "condescending."<sup>42</sup> They have searched for "neutral" criteria by which to discern the presence of God in other religions.<sup>43</sup> They are concerned about a triumphalist use of the Trinity where there is no serious and painstaking attempt to learn about another religion.

But I would ask, Is it possible to have neutral criteria? What is meant by the term? Neutral in what sense? If the point is simply that we should avoid arbitrary or biased criteria which prevent us from adequately assessing the religions, then we must agree. But some claim that criteria derived from explicitly Christian sources should not be used in such assessment. This seems unacceptable. Surely any genuinely Christian theological evaluation of other religions must use some criteria derived from Scripture and the Christian tradition. This means that every evaluation of another religion by a Christian—no matter how fair and neutral that Christian tries to be—will inevitably judge that religion by criteria that have been conditioned by Christian thinking.<sup>44</sup> Christian use of "relationality,"<sup>45</sup> for example, cannot avoid being influenced by Christian understandings of love and justice, even when attempts are made to find similar notions in non-Christian traditions. Therefore, if "imperialistic" means using criteria which have been shaped in part by one's own religious tradition when evaluating another tradition, no Christian theologian of the religions can avoid being "imperialistic." But, of course, the same holds for any evaluation of an alternative religious perspective made by a Hindu or Buddhist or Muslim or Mormon. This does not excuse inattention and insensitivity to the particularities of the other, but it does suggest that the search for neutral criteria in

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<sup>41</sup> Sanneh, "Do Christians and Muslims Worship the Same God?," *The Christian Century* 121.9 (4 May 2004): 35.

<sup>42</sup> Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *Trinity and Religious Pluralism: The Doctrine of the Trinity in Christian Theology of Religions* (Aldershot, Eng.: Ashgate, 2004), 165. The terms in quotes are from others whom Kärkkäinen is citing.

<sup>43</sup> Yong, *Beyond the Impasse*, 73, 91, 179.

<sup>44</sup> We can accept Yong's call for neutral *categories* with which to evaluate religions, but not his suggestion that a human *observer* can be neutral in her final comparative assessments. So we can agree with his warning that a category such as divine revelation is not useful for assessing the scriptures of non-theistic religions like Theravada Buddhism (since revelation requires a deity who reveals), but that categories such as "scriptures" are better, since some religions like Theravada Buddhism have scriptures but no concept of revelation (*Beyond the Impasse*, 178–79). But we disagree with his further suggestion that it is possible for Christians to transcend their Christian identities and attain a degree of neutrality such that they can experience the "realities" of another religion "to some degree 'from within.'" Yong, "A P(new)matological Paradigm for Christian Mission in a Religiously Plural World," *Missiology* 33 (April 2005): 180–81.

<sup>45</sup> Yong, *Beyond the Impasse*, 131–32.

theologies of religions—innocent of influence from one’s own tradition—is neither desirable nor possible.

### VIII. TRINITY IN ITS NARRATIVE FULLNESS

In conclusion, we should not shy away from fresh and creative ways of expressing Trinitarian faith, but we should nonetheless use Trinitarian criteria, lest our final theologies be based on what Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen calls “abstract speculations ... [or] alleged similarities among religions.”<sup>46</sup> This would rule out, he warns, “kingdom-centered approaches (of, for example, the Catholic Paul F. Knitter) in which the advancement of the kingdom is set in opposition to or divorced from the Father, Son, and Spirit.”<sup>47</sup> Kärkkäinen allows that the kingdom of God is larger than the visible church but agrees with Gavin D’Costa that the presence of the Spirit outside the church is intrinsically Trinitarian and ecclesial. “It is trinitarian in referring the Holy Spirit’s activity to the paschal mystery of Christ, and ecclesial in referring the paschal event to the Spirit’s constitutive community-creating force under the guidance of the Spirit.”<sup>48</sup> In the NT, he asserts, the church is the body of Christ and temple of the Spirit. Thus whenever the Spirit is at work in a saving way, he is drawing persons toward eventual incorporation into Christ’s body, the church.

Furthermore, Kärkkäinen insists that Trinitarian full disclosure is actually helpful to interreligious dialogue: “Trinitarian faith and the ‘scandal of particularity’ are not to be thought of as opposites.”<sup>49</sup> Here Kärkkäinen draws on the work of Sri Lankan evangelical Vinoth Ramachandra, who explains that “particularity is for the purpose of universality, not exclusion.”<sup>50</sup> God chose one nation and one mediator in order to reach all. Jesus’s uniqueness in Trinitarian faith does not impose on Asian religions but in fact “safeguards some of the legitimate concerns of contemporary Asian theologians”<sup>51</sup>—such as poverty, human equality as created in the image of God, humility, service, and self-sacrifice. Rather than handicapping Asian theologians in interreligious dialogue, the Jesus of the Trinitarian God opens up channels of communication with other religious traditions.

After Jonathan Edwards and until very recently, evangelicals have neglected this hallmark of the Christian doctrine of God. They have regularly and consistently expressed their agreement with the doctrine of the Trinity but have often engaged in apologetics, for example, with a generic “theistic” idea of God rather than a Trinitarian one. Feeling compelled to leave the specifically Trinitarian teaching outside the debating hall, they have not recognized the extent to which they need a robust Trinitarian notion of God not just as a chapter in their dogmatics, but as a foundational component of their apologetics. Of course, it is sometimes quite appropriate to *start* with mere theism, as Paul did at the Areopagus in Acts 17, but just

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 124.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 126.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 128.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., citing Vinoth Ramachandra, *The Recovery of Mission* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 216.

as Paul then turned the discussion toward the Son of God's resurrection, apologetics should not typically *end* with theism.