

# A Survey of Current Theologies of Religion



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## 1. Introduction

Andrew Kirk (1999:118) remarks, 'Of all the topics encompassed by the study of mission none is more fundamental and controversial than the relation between Christian and non-Christian faiths'. Moreover, David Bosch (1991:477) calls the *theologia religionum* ('theology of religions') 'the epitome of mission theology', noting that the theology of religions has dominated missiological studies from the 1960s. The Roman Catholic missiologists Bevans and Schroeder (2004:254) concur, 'The most challenging question facing the church and mission at the end of the twentieth century, within both Catholicism and Protestantism, was the question of the relationship of Christianity and other religions, and this continues to be the case today.' Similarly, Perry Schmidt-Leukel (2009) considers 'theology of religions' a necessary task when seriously engaging with non-Christian religions. Also, the evangelical scholars Kang-San Tan (2000) and Miriam Adeney (2005) agreed on the foundational importance of a theology of religions in an Asian mission context. This essay, therefore, addresses primary, not peripheral, issues.

First, the essay addresses Christ's uniqueness in a pluralistic world from the traditional Christian understanding of uniqueness and then considers the pluralist, inclusivist and exclusivist perspectives. The views of representative scholars are described and evaluated. Second, the essay evaluates the threefold typology for theologies of religion by examining arguments for/against the typology. Proposed replacements for the classical typology are examined. A conclusion summarises the terrain covered.

The position adopted follows Tiessen (2004) with a Western evangelical stance and critical realism as the approach to truth. The southward shift of Christianity is recognised (Ott and Netland 2006) and that religious plurality, recent in the West, has been 'a long-standing issue in Asia' (Tan 2000). Theology of religions is complex, challenging and contested.

## 2. The Uniqueness of Christ in a Pluralistic World

### 2.1 Orthodox Christianity: Historical Priority

Bosch's (1991) developing missionary paradigms up to the present 'shifting scene' demonstrates that until the eighteenth century there was a 'collective certitude' in the church from the Middle Ages that has now vanished. The Enlightenment paradigm, expecting religions to disappear, was wrong and religious resurgence is evident. Such circumstances, according to Bosch (1991:476-477), present the church with 'totally unprecedented challenges'. Two problems needing solving are the church's relationship '(1) to *world views which offer this-worldly salvation*, and (2) to *other faiths*.' The second one, a 'theology of religions' is at the heart of mission theology and discussions in the Roman Catholic and Protestant churches. Previously, the Catholic model saw salvation only available inside the church (*extra ecclesiam nulla salus*) - while Protestants saw salvation as only available through the Word.

Similarly, Netland (2001) observes that traditionally Christians taught God's unique revelation through the Scriptures and in Christ's incarnation. Therefore, 'sinful humanity can be reconciled to God only through the sinless person and atoning work of Jesus Christ, the one Lord and Savior for all people in all cultures' (2001:24). For twenty centuries this was orthodox Christian teaching, rooted in the New Testament (and its pluralistic world)

(Flemming 2005) and early church practice. Belief in Christ as the only Saviour and Christianity as the true religion was foundational for the modern missionary movements.

However, Netland (2001 and 2004) observes, in the last fifty years rapid and radical change occurred in Europe and North America. Through secularisation, globalisation and changing demographics the West's population has experienced growing diversity. However, Ramachandra (2008) shows, for example, that the sixteenth-century English were not ignorant of Islam. Trade, alliances and negotiations were common for 'The English might have their reservations about Islam, but these were nothing compared to their hatred and fear of "popery".' He notes the West's 'historical amnesia'.

Today, Christianity's uniqueness claims are challenged. Christianity is universal and particular (centred in Jesus' uniqueness) but, 'This understanding of the gospel, however, is regarded by many as not only intellectually untenable but also morally unacceptable in a diverse world' (Netland 2001:13). Christian claims are declared arrogant and dogmatic (Newbigin 1989). What has changed?

## **2.2 Emerging Pluralism and a Pluralistic World**

Newbigin (1989) observes that modern Britain is a 'plural society' with three pluralisms: ideological, cultural and religious. Cultural pluralism cherishes diverse cultures/life-styles. However, religious pluralism 'is the belief that the differences between the religions are not a matter of truth and falsehood, but of different perceptions of the one truth; that to speak of religious belief as true or false is inadmissible'(1989:14). Uniqueness claims for Jesus and salvation conflict with society's 'plausibility structures'. Pluralism is, says Newbigin (1989: 156), 'the contemporary orthodoxy'. Netland (2001) also recognises 'shifting perspectives on other religions' challenge to orthodox Christianity. In this context, scholars hold diverse religious views.

## **2.3 The Threefold Typology and Uniqueness**

Christian scholars use a threefold typology, from Race (1983), for a Christian theology of religions: pluralist, inclusivist and exclusivist. However, Bosch (1991) uses the terms exclusivism/fulfillment/relativism. Kirk (1999) chooses particularity/generality/universality and Netland (2001) substitutes 'particularism' for exclusivism.

### **2.3.1 Pluralism**

Netland (2001) observes that pluralism recognises that salvation (or its equivalent) is available in each religion and no religion is superior or normative for they all offer a route(s) to the divine reality. Christianity is not unique and normative for all humankind although Christians may consider it so for themselves. Religious pluralism is particularly associated with John Hick and Paul Knitter, e.g. *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness* (1987). D'Costa (2009) observes 'three varieties': unitary pluralists (e.g. John Hick and Perry Schmidt-Leukel), pluriform pluralists (e.g. Raimundo Panikkar and Mark Heim), and ethical pluralists (e.g. Paul Knitter).

D'Costa (2009:6) notes unitary pluralists hold 'that all religions are, or can be, equal and valid paths to the one divine reality ... a single unitary divine being behind the different plural religious phenomena.' Pluriform pluralists recognize 'different paths to different plural divine realities' while ethical pluralists 'hold that all religions are related to the divine inasmuch as they contain certain ethical codes and practices, and religions should not be judged according to the conceptual pictures of divine reality they profess' (2009:6). Despite differences, e.g. Heim (1995) is critical of Hick's pluralism and argues for multiple salvations

or religious ends, their common ground is that Christ is only one revelation among many valid revelations. Traditional understanding of Christ's uniqueness is redefined.

D'Costa (2009) notes Hick argued against a traditional Christian teaching on *solus Christus* or Christ-centered (or *Christocentric*) salvation, or church-centered (*ecclesiocentric*) approach, and for a God-centered (or *theocentric*) understanding. In religions, God is the centre not Christ. Hick argues that Christ's incarnation is not literal but 'mythically' or metaphorical which is 'as an expression of devotion and commitment by Christians, not as an ontologically claim, about the unique and exclusive action of God in this particular man, Jesus' (D'Costa 2009:9). In 'The Non-Absoluteness of Christianity' Hick (1987:31-32) calls this 'inspiration christology' and argues it occurs in many different people. Jesus is not unique. In response to criticisms that his *theocentric* position excluded the non-theistic religions, Hick changed from God to 'noumenal Real' or Reality centeredness.

Exclusivists and inclusivists critique pluralism and defend Christ's uniqueness/universality, e.g. Carson (1996), Chung (2005), D'Costa (1990, 1993, 2009), Fernando (2005), Geivett and Phillips (1995), Nazir-Ali (2008), Netland (2001) and Sinkinson (2001). In particular, Western authors have defended 'the conceptual role of truth' but Tan (2000:303) observes Asian Christians have 'a more functional concept of truth', i.e. the way truth is communicated is also essential. In pluralism, conflicting truth claims are often inadequately addressed, e.g. did Jesus die on the cross (Christians) or not (Muslims) (Parrinder 1982)? Pluralists often compromise the authority/integrity of the Scriptures (Kuschel 1997) and reduce religions to the lowest common denominator which believers reject.

Beaumont (2005:158) notes that the Muslim scholar Muzzammil H. Siddiqi 'has two problems with Hick's enthusiasm for pluralism. Firstly, Hick does not make room for revelation, and, secondly, Hick thinks different belief systems are equally valid.' Sinkinson (2001) rightly objects to Hick's model of revelation and his Ultimate Reality as an 'unknown god.' Hick's pluralism rejects Christ's uniqueness and our knowledge of God as Trinity. Furthermore, Knitter's claim that 'pluralistic theology' is the only basis for dialogue with world religions is rebuffed by Moltmann (1990:155) who remarks 'A pluralistic theology of religions can be no less imperialistic than the Christian theologies that Knitter wants to overcome.' Finally, for evangelicals, Tan (2000) remarks 'Commitment to the God revealed in Scripture means Christ becomes the model for approaching people of other faiths' and their high Christology does not compromise uniqueness.

### 2.3.2 Inclusivism

Inclusivism, a position advocated by some evangelicals, is a broad/ambiguous category. Clark Pinnock ably summarises his view in Okholm and Phillips (1995) as a cautious inclusivist as distinct from a 'less cautious inclusivist' (e.g. Rahner's 'anonymous Christian'). Pinnock accepts that God may work in other religions but does not recognise them as salvific. Netland (2001) notes inclusivists' three principles: (a) Christ is unique and normative to other religious leaders and provides salvation, (b) Salvation, based on Christ, is available through other religions and (c) these are positive and within God's purpose. Strange (2002:38-39) defines inclusivism as 'Christ is *ontologically* necessary for salvation but not *epistemologically* necessary' but he forcefully argues, from his Reformed position, against Pinnock's inclusivism.

Sennett (2005), hoping to allay unfounded evangelical fears over inclusivism, argues for a 'bare bones inclusivism' similar to Pinnock's 'cautious'/'modal' inclusivism but more cautious, arguing from Romans 1:20. His 'bare bones inclusivism' abstains from commenting on truth/grace in non-Christian religions (although rejecting pluralism), but accepts the special/general revelation distinction and considers the salvation of the 'unevangelised'. Using philosophical theology, Sennett argues 'that the condemnation of the unevangelised is

justified only if they have not responded appropriately to general revelation' (2005:319). He wisely recognises that Hick (1995a) will remain dissatisfied for he wants exclusivists/inclusivists to become pluralists.

Nevertheless, Sennett, like many scholars, fails to define 'salvation'. Does he mean eschatological salvation, present salvation (1 Cor 1:18) or both? Are unevangelised Muslims who respond 'appropriately to general revelation' saved and in what sense? Adeney's (2001) contextual study argues that Islam fails to provide a nurturing context for discipling Muslim-Background believers. Also, Gnanakan (2001), while appreciating her contribution, asks how we measure discipleship and whether Jesus' community is wider than the church community. Yong (2003:107) sensibly wants to move inclusivism 'from abstract theology to more concrete empirical analysis and engagement with the world of religions'.

David Cheetham (2008) shows 'inclusivisms' exist, while D'Costa (2009:7) identifies two types: structural inclusivists and restrictive inclusivists. Structural inclusivists see Christ as God's 'normative revelation' but this salvation is available through other religions but only based on Christ. Restrictive inclusivists, e.g. Pinnock (1995), see Christ as God's 'normative revelation' but this does not legitimate other religions as salvific although salvation is available outside the church. D'Costa (2009:7) summarizes, 'In both, Christ is ontologically and causally exclusive to salvation but not necessarily epistemologically.' He sees this as *solus Christus* but not *fides ex auditu*. Inclusivists retain an orthodox view of Christ's uniqueness against pluralists. However, Stackhouse (2001:196) rightly agrees that the epistemological/ontological distinction is insufficient for believers must believe 'something about someone (who is God) in order for the fundamental direction of her faith to be properly orientated and fruitful. An epistemologically (or "cognitively") empty faith is inconceivable.' A saving faith requires specific content.

Inclusivism has merit in not restricting God's action to the church and recognising God's Spirit operates in other religions. Adeney (2001) relates to non-Christian religions positively explaining she has learnt from Buddhists, Confucians, animists and Muslims. Similarly, Tan (2000:302) recognises 'many things about life and God ... can be learned from non-believers and other religions.' Moreover, Parshall's (2003) church planting spectrum (C-scale) demonstrates contextualization controversies and secret believers remaining 'Muslim' (not in the visible church). Finally, McDermott's (2007) investigation of the Bible and early church theologians regarding 'the scandal of particularity' concludes that God permitted religions, using truth in them to prepare cultures/individuals to receive the gospel while also teaching the church.

### 2.3.3 Exclusivism

Exclusivism is the 'default' condition for evangelicals (Sennett 2005) and the church's traditional perspective. [1] Netland (2001:48) identifies exclusivism's broad principles: (1) the Bible as God's full revelation, (2) Christ as God's unique incarnation who alone provides salvation and (3) God's salvation is unavailable through other religions. This theological exclusivism leaves open other issues where evangelicals disagree.

D'Costa (2009:7) identifies two types: restrictive-access exclusivists and universal-access exclusivists. Restrictive-access exclusivists believe 'God is exclusively revealed in Jesus Christ *solus Christus*' and they restrict salvation to the elect. Universal-access exclusivists accept the exclusivity claim but anyone hearing the gospel and professing Christ can be saved. This confession can be in this life, at the time of death (Tiessen 2004) or post-mortem (D'Costa 2009).

Against the World Council of Churches' liberalism, evangelicals have issued declarations on Christ's uniqueness, e.g. the Frankfurt Declaration (1970) and Lausanne Covenant (1974). The Manila Declaration (1992) 'The Unique Christ in Our Pluralistic World' expresses the

'heart of particularism' (Netland 2001). For example, 'Against ... pluralism, we affirm that God has acted decisively, supremely, and normatively in the historical Jesus of Nazareth' (Gnanakan 1995:305).

However, exclusivist attitudes to unbelievers/non-Christian religions have produced resentment in Postcolonialism (Pui-lan 2000) and pluralism (Hick 1987). In countries where ancestor practices are important dogmatic assertions that ancestors are lost because they did not confess Christ are unwelcome and damaging. [2] Gnanakan (2001:186) rightly requests a humble biblical and contextual review of the 'hard-line exclusivist position' particularly on heaven/hell since he is bothered by 'the arrogant certainty most evangelicals seem to display in answering questions beyond our knowledge.' Evangelicals need to engage in interreligious dialogue/study (not fearing syncretism) and not compromising their biblical faith (Tan 2005).

### 2.3.4 Universalism

Universalists occur in the three categories. D'Costa (2009) remarks that Barth, Rahner and Hick (respectively: exclusivist, inclusivist and pluralist) are universalists. While Rahner has a hope, Barth and Hick express certainty for the world's salvation.

Tiessen (2004:486) notes 'Universalism asserts that every human being will finally be saved'. However, this salvation, irrespective of personal faith, or none, is attained by all people through Christ's redemptive work. Hille (2007) observes salvation is offered by grace and ultimately imparted irrespective of personal acceptance of Christ. Christ's work is unique *ontologically* but not *epistemologically* necessary. Those believing in this life will be saved and unbelievers are saved post-mortem. Universalism rests on two main attributes of God: omnipotence and love. The proof-text is 1 Tim 2:3-4. God's universal will to save cannot be thwarted by sin/evil.

Talbott (1999) argues, from the Scriptures, for universalism as against annihilation or unending conscious punishment. Although assuming Christ's uniqueness, he does not discuss the threefold typology/theology of religions. Talbott believes all people will be saved through Christ after an undefined period in hell. Similarly, Parry and Partridge (2003) argue for universalism.

J.I. Packer (1990) argues against universalism. Similarly, the Manila Declaration (1992) rejected universalism as unbiblical (Gnanakan 1995). However, although Strange (2002:31) rejects universalism as a 'credible option for evangelicals' MacDonald's *Evangelical Universalist* makes his case as 'a hopeful dogmatic universalist' (2008:4). Whereas 'hopeful universalists' hope, from Scripture, that God will save everyone they are not certain. Christian 'dogmatic universalists' are certain that God will save everybody. MacDonald is not '100% certain that it is correct', hence he is 'a hopeful dogmatic universalist'. He rejects Hick's pluralist universalism as unbiblical and marginalizing Christ's unique salvific role, arguing instead for a *Christian* universalism. MacDonald's universalism does not undermine evangelism or the motive for mission and evangelical universalists are expected to foster 'a mission-focused spirituality' (2008:172). Many evangelicals will remain unconvinced.

## 3. Evaluation of the Threefold Typology/Theology of Religions

### 3.1 Defending the Typology

The Western typology is widely usage. The evangelical exclusivist Strange (2002:15) sees the typology 'as three points of reference on a wide spectrum' and so works within the typology in challenging Pinnock's inclusivism. However, Strange also develops his own

useful categories for a more nuanced understanding of inclusivism. Kärkkäinen (2003:24) considers the typology as having 'the potential of becoming *the* typology of theology of religions' but then constructs another typology (see below).

Hedges (2008) has ably defended the classical typology answering objections that: (a) it misconstrues religious diversity; (b) there are more, or less, categories; (c) categories are incoherent; (d) it is unable to handle the various positions held, and (d) the terms are polemic. He sees good reasons for continuing Race's original classification since it provides a 'useful framework' in which other approaches can be located. Hedges (2008:27) sees the threefold category as 'fluid categories with permeable membranes' and not straightjackets. The typologies are: descriptive, heuristic, multivalent, and permeable. They are not 'prescriptive, normative, defining and closed' (2008:27). However, when the former supporter D'Costa (2009) has lost faith in the typology Hedges is fighting an uphill battle.

Hedges rightly agrees with plural categories: 'exclusivisms-inclusivisms-pluralisms'. However, his arguments are not completely persuasive for while defending the threefold category he challenges it! He adds 'particularities' to form a fourfold category: 'exclusivisms-inclusivisms-pluralisms-particularities' and considers 'femininism' as a paradigm, from Jeannine Hill Fletcher (2008:30). She persuasively argues for a feminist rethink of the current boundaries since 'few feminist theologians have constructed a systematic theology of religions' (2008:136).

A further defence of the threefold category is its global use. For example, Ramachandra (1996) uses it to critique the pluralist Asian theologians Stanley Samartha, Aloysius Pieris and Raimundo Panikkar, and How Chuang Chua (2007) supports Ramachandra. Moreover, Ashk Dahlén (2006) addresses religious pluralism in Iran asking if among Muslim intellectuals 'Abd al-Karim Surush is the John Hick of Iran. Dahlén's philosophical and theological debate uses the threefold typology. Similarly, Robertson (2009) in *Dharma Deepika* writes a defence of religious pluralism in South Asia, inter-religious relations and global ethics while engaging with Western/non-Western theologians. The typology is not restricted to the West.

## 3.2 Critiquing the Typology

### 3.2.1 General Remarks

The threefold typology is under attack. Okholm and Phillips (1995:16) note 'the label *exclusive* is so prejudicial that it precedes true dialogue'. Rejecting also its prejudicial synonym *restrictivism* they choose *particularism*. Similarly, Kirk criticises its negative category connotations, noting 'exclusivism' appears narrow-minded, 'pluralism' suggests 'lack of concern' while 'inclusivism' seems open-minded (1999:127-128). He chooses particularity, generality and universality. Netland (2001:46-48) replaces exclusivism with particularism. Previously, he used the threefold category but now finds fault with the taxonomy for obscuring 'subtle, but very significant, difference among positions and thinkers' (2001:47). Nevertheless, he concludes, 'with proper qualification the three categories can be useful tools for helping to sort out various perspectives on other religions' (2001:48). In contrast, Hick (1995b:246) calls 'particularism' a meaningless term since 'everything is particular'. Moreover, Heim (1995:4) argues the typology can 'seriously mislead us' since its coherence works from 'the assumption that salvation is an unequivocal, single reality' which he challenges. McDermott (2007:23) states 'the typology has collapsed'.

Kärkkäinen (2003) replaces the classic category with: ecclesiocentrism, Christocentrism, theocentrism, and Realitycentrism. The supposed gain is showing the recent dynamic movement in thinking from ecclesiocentrism towards Realitycentrism. However, this appears

to offer little but a renamed original, as Hedges (2008) observes. Hedges (2008) has also evaluated typologies by Schmidt-Leukel, Knitter and Thomas plus the 'comparative theology' approach. This demonstrates the substantial interest in developing relevant categories for a theology of religions. However, limited space prevents further discussion.

D'Costa (2009:34-35) critiques the typology for two main reasons: (1) its failure to precisely 'deliver' on the unbelievers' salvation, and (2) all three positions are exclusivist. He suggests 'a seven-graded classification' on how someone is saved, distinguishing between 'the *means* and the *goal of salvation*.' These means/goals are: trinity-centered, Christ-centered, Spirit-centered, church-centered, theocentric, reality-centered and ethics-centered. Whether this classification is accepted by scholars is an open question but it looks a useful way forward.

Moreover, Tan (2007:384) notes the categories are too sharp, lacking complexity and nuance e.g. some evangelicals while exclusive on Jesus' salvation accept insights from non-Christian religions. Consequently, he introduces new models with Tiessen's five categories and Hans Frei's five-type typology. These are explained next.

### 3.2.2 Tiessen's Categories

Tiessen criticises the threefold typology and proposes five clear categories: '*ecclesiocentrism, agnosticism, accessibilism, religious instrumentalism* and *relativism*' (2004:32). Tiessen intentionally incorporates Yong's (2003) observation that the category 'exclusivism' addresses the unevangelised but is not particularly suited to addressing issues in the theology of religions.

Tiessen's categories *ecclesiocentrism, agnosticism, accessibilism* concern the unevangelised while his other two (*religious instrumentalism* and *relativism*) address the theology of religions. His categories are more nuanced than the threefold category while recognising two important distinctions: the unevangelised and non-Christian religions. Importantly, the first four categories affirm Christ's uniqueness for salvation and the first three agree that non-Christian religions are not salvific.

Ecclesiocentrists contend that accessibility to salvation is only available to those hearing the gospel, although Tiessen adds, 'at least in the case of competent adults' (2004:33). [3] Agnosticism admits ignorance on the fate of the unevangelised since Scripture is silent. Accessibilists, however, understand that God works beyond the church so, contra ecclesiocentrists, there is salvation outside its boundaries. God makes salvation *accessible* to the unevangelised but the non-Christian religions are not salvific. Potential for confusion exists here. Tiessen admits that his category *accessibilism* is considered by many evangelicals as *inclusivist* (a term Tiessen deliberately avoids). However, Tiessen makes his position clear, 'accessibilists believe that God may save people who are members of other religions, but religious instrumentalists believe that God has raised up those religions as his instruments in salvation' (2004:33).

Tiessen's fourth category *religious instrumentalism*, recognises Christ's uniqueness but accepts that non-Christian religions are salvific. This category matches some definitions of inclusivism, e.g. Netland (1991) and Carson (1996). Finally, *relativism* teaches that Christ is not the only saviour and salvation is available through non-Christian religions. This is pluralism in the threefold scheme but Tiessen avoids 'pluralism' because of ambiguity. Both *religious instrumentalism* and *relativism* focus on the theology of religions while *accessibilism* also permits engagement with non-Christian religions. Tiessen's categories are much more nuanced than the threefold scheme.

### 3.2.3 Hans Frei's Types

Tan (2007) argues for contextual reformation, with non-Christian religions being approached on their own terms, rather than via traditional evangelical categories (which need transformation). He illustrates this with Malaysian Christian-Muslim relations. Moreover, Tan proposes Frei and Hunsburger's (1992) five types of theology as fruitful for developing 'a more critical evaluation of approaches towards non-Christian religions' (2007:386). Frei's approach arose from dissatisfaction with insufficient nuance in the pluralism and exclusivism categories. Tan (2007) notes that this led evangelicals to withdraw from engagement with non-Christian religions but the new typology offers a spectrum based on Christianity's relationship with modernism rather than traditional approaches (e.g. evangelical and liberal).

Two polarities exist in Frei's typology: *Type 1* and *Type 5*. *Type 1* develops theology from modern philosophy, the Enlightenment and various agenda. It is essentially pluralistic without biblical/Christian roots. In contrast, *Type 5* builds a worldview on Scripture for encountering non-Christian religions. Here Western Christian categories drive the un-nuanced discussion with other religions (e.g. Islam). Contextualisation is ignored. For example, *Type 5* is frequently held by fundamentalist communities. Between these extremes *Type 2-4* communities provide better foundations for addressing the theology of religion. *Type 2* permits interaction between Christian theology and modern sciences/theories, and studying non-Christian religions. However, Tan recognises that some adopted agendas (e.g. dialogue or pluralism) set an 'integrative framework' for encountering non-Christian peoples but the result is 'minimum engagement with Scripture' (2007:386).

The central position (*Type 3*) recognises that multi-perspectives are needed and not an overarching agenda. Engagement with non-Christian religions requires understanding particular religions in-depth. Tan (2007:387) notes 'the key issue is correlation' – connecting Christian faith and understanding people of other faiths (e.g. Christian salvation with nirvana). Religion, culture, social context and gospel are considered. There is no inhibiting 'meta-narrative'. Tan rightly recognises that detailed knowledge and in-depth study of non-Christian religions will give 'evangelicals a reliable position to make judgements, to come up with truth-validations, and to allow the Christian gospels interaction with any contradictory truths' (2007:387). *Type 3*, Tan suggests, could include the Roman Catholic D'Costa and the accessibilists Tiessen and Newbigin. Finally, *Type 4* avoids correlation while prioritising Christian narrative. From its Scriptural/gospel roots it seeks to understand other faiths including dialogue. It appears suitable for mainstream evangelicals. Thus Frei's typology has considerable merit. However, two other positions need consideration.

### **3.2.4 Feminist Theology of Religions**

Hedges (2008) suggests a feminist contribution. Historically, North American feminist scholars were outspoken (e.g. against patriarchy) with important contributions, e.g. Schüssler Fiorenza (1983) and Newsom and Ringe (1998). However, Western feminist discourse of 'women's experience' is non-representative of tricontinental women and Young (2003) suggests tricontinental feminism needs constructing. Similarly, Hill Fletcher (2008:136) observes, 'Few feminist theologians have constructed a systematic theology of religions.' Moreover, many 'feminist approaches ... lean in a theologically liberal direction toward pluralism' (2008:144). Fabella (1993) develops a pluralist Christology. Chung Hyun Kyung (1993) discusses traditional/new images of Jesus for Asian women and Pui-lan (2000:78) asserts 'the myth of the uniqueness of Jesus Christ fuels Christian triumphalism and exclusivity.' An evangelical feminist theology of religions should be developed.

### **3.2.5 Pneumatological and Trinitarian Theology of Religions**

Finally, Yong (2001 and 2003) proposes a pneumatological paradigm focusing on the Spirit. However, Kärkkäinen (2003 and 2006), although initially receptive, questions this approach

and proposes five guidelines. Kärkkäinen (2004 and 2006) offers a valuable way forward through trinitarian theology critiquing pluralism, recognising the triune God as unique, the relationship between Christology/Trinity and dialogue. Any changes in categories should be capable of incorporating Kärkkäinen's developing contribution.

#### 4. Conclusions

This essay uses a Western evangelical and critical realist stance to investigate the theology of religions which recognising Christianity's southward shift. First, it demonstrated the importance modern scholarship attaches to understanding Christ's uniqueness in a pluralistic world. Beginning with historic orthodox Christianity it showed the development of religious pluralism and critically engaged with the pluralist, inclusivist and exclusivist categories and universalism. Second, it evaluated the threefold category in terms of its retention or rejection. Tiessen's and Frei's category-proposals were considered. Finally, feminism, pneumatological and trinitarian proposals were introduced. It has demonstrated that the theology of religions is complex, challenging and contested but Christians must sensitivity engage with it in modern missions.

#### Notes

[1] Strange (2002:7) gives 'six doctrinal convictions' for evangelical identity.

[2] Gnanakan (1995) 'A Working Document Towards a Christian Approach to Ancestor Practices'.

[3] Tiessen identifies five groups among the unevangelised (2004:13). Strange (2002:32-35) uses four categories.

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