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TRINITARIAN CHRISTOLOGY: THE GRAMMAR OF THE CHRISTIAN FAITH AND THE FOUNDATION FOR
A THEOLOGY OF RELIGIOUS PLURALISM

by

Eric Christensen

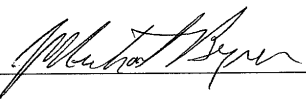
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TRINITARIAN CHRISTOLOGY: THE GRAMMAR OF THE CHRISTIAN FAITH AND THE FOUNDATION FOR
A THEOLOGY OF RELIGIOUS PLURALISM

Description: This essay explores the interaction of George Lindbeck's cultural-linguistic model of religious knowledge and Jacques Dupuis' trinitarian Christology as a model for a theology of religious pluralism. The goal is to provide a basic overview of how the work of these two thinkers might work together to articulate a theology of religious pluralism. In summary, a cultural-linguistic model does not provide conclusions in advance for the theology of religions. Rather, it allows a freedom in which to explore how doctrines might be formulated in order to remain true to the inherited tradition, to contemporary religious experience, and to the situation of religious pluralism. It also allows for and encourages interreligious dialogue, which can foster mutual cooperation and respect, as well as the ability to understand and employ other religions' cultural and linguistic grammar.

In the case of Christianity, trinitarian theology is central. It is the primary grammar of our faith. As such, we may legitimately inquire into whether the doctrine of the Trinity ontologically corresponds to the reality of God. Jacques Dupuis is one pluralist theologian who believes that it does, and I am inclined to agree with him. In addition to being a central belief of Christian faith, it can also provide a firm foundation on which to build a Christian theology of religious pluralism. God is one and yet triune; there are different yet convergent paths to salvation. Lindbeck's model affirms the possibility of these statements, and Dupuis' theology demonstrates its content and form.

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The development of the specific discipline of the theology of religions is relatively recent, but it is increasingly coming to occupy a central position in theological discourse around the globe. As the world becomes more and more interconnected, our awareness of the plurality of cultures, languages, and religions comes into ever sharper focus. Therefore, it is a vitally important task of theologians to explore the burgeoning field of the theology of religions. This endeavor takes place on both the theoretical and practical spheres of life. Just as we must articulate our theological beliefs about the plurality of religions as well as we can, so must we live amidst this plurality in a manner that fosters authentic communion and respect. In this sense, theology and lived experience can never be divorced from one another; indeed, they must mutually inform one another if we are to lead authentic Christian lives in our pluralistic world.

On the basis of these brief reflections, I propose that the most important foundational question to be answered in our theology of religions is whether pluralism exists only *of fact* (*de facto*) or if it is *of principle* (*de iure*). In other words, does God positively will the existence of many religions and affirm them as good (and even salvific) in themselves? Anticipating the results of the following theological investigation, I believe that God has indeed willed a pluralism *de iure* and that he is present in all religions and cultures. To say otherwise would be to deny God's infinite goodness and his concern for the well-being of the entirety of his creation. No part of creation and no human person is beyond his love and care. The question is not *whether* God is present and active in all religions, but *how* he is present; and, of course, the challenge is how to articulate this.

To support my views, I will draw upon the cultural-linguistic method employed by George Lindbeck, as well as the trinitarian approach to a theology of religious pluralism

developed by Jacques Dupuis. Lindbeck offers a theological vision that allows for dialogue within pluralism that does not necessarily dictate the results *a priori*. It also clarifies a number of concerns within Christianity itself pertaining to doctrine and truth. I will draw upon Dupuis' work to explore how the doctrine of the Trinity is necessary for Christian theology in general and a Christian theology of religious pluralism in particular. In an age when many theologians are attempting to articulate and radical revision of traditional doctrinal beliefs about the Trinity, Dupuis steadfastly affirms the doctrine's central place in Christian theology, spirituality, and religious practices. In my view, trinitarian theology is indispensable for Christianity. The route towards an authentic theology of religions does not lie in its abrogation. Rather, we may draw upon it to develop an integral and profound Christian theology of religious pluralism.¹ This essay will explore the primary themes of Lindbeck and Dupuis' work that relate to trinitarian theology's central role in the development of a theology of religions. Would Lindbeck and Dupuis agree with my assessment and integration of their work? I suspect they would make some revisions, yet I hope that the basic theological moves in this essay effectively and accurately drawn upon their work to provide a theological position that also is my own voice. Additionally, I will make the assumption that my audience is familiar with the basic issues surrounding the theology of religions. By doing so, I will avoid repeating the introductory material that is so often rehashed in the literature of this area of theology. It should also allow me to dedicate more time to an in-depth analysis of some important themes.²

¹ I will use "theology of religions" as a general term, and "theology of religious pluralism" as a specific term that can be considered a type of the first term. By doing so, I am consciously following Jacques Dupuis' convention and also affirming that the issue at stake in the essay is how to articulate and defend religious pluralism *de iure* on the basis of trinitarian theology.

² For an excellent overview of the discipline, see Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *An Introduction to the Theology of Religions: Biblical, Historical, and Contemporary Perspectives* (Downer's Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2003). It should be noted, however, that this work is already somewhat dated, though it remains fundamentally sound and relevant to the current discussion. Some of the major figures surveyed in the book, such as Jacques Dupuis, Gavin D. Costa, and Paul Knitter have written subsequent material which expands their previous thought in

Lindbeck's Cultural-Linguistic Method

Lindbeck distinguishes among three approaches to religious knowledge. The first is the “cognitive-propositional model” in which doctrines function as informative propositions or truth claims about objective realities. This has been the predominant model throughout the majority of the history of Christianity and has been closely tied to an exclusivist theology of religions. If one religion claims that it holds the unchangeable and unsurpassable truth, then naturally other religions cannot be true in the same manner as the one true religion. This is an oversimplification, however, for it could be possible to adhere to a cognitive-propositional model of religious truth while acknowledging that when the subject being discussed is none other than the infinite God, then naturally our language will always fall short of the fullness of God's reality. Therefore, different religions may still have access to parts of the ultimate Truth, but there will be one religion which contains the most truth, at least in the sense that it most adequately describes the ultimate reality and contains the fewest falsehoods. Such a position might fall into the inclusivist category. In any case, the cognitive-propositional model is not easily adapted to accommodate religious pluralism *de iure*. At most, it can respectfully, and perhaps even fruitfully, tolerate pluralism *de facto*.

The second model may be called the “experiential-expressive model,” for it holds that doctrines are “noninformative and nondiscursive symbols of inner feelings, attitudes, or existential orientation.”³ This model is not concerned with the propositional veracity of religious statements; rather, it looks to the ability of a doctrine to be polyvalent in order to fit the needs of a variety of religious believers. John Hick is a prime example of a theologian who employs this

significant ways. In fact, Knitter has also written an insightful introductory volume on the subject entitled *Introducing Theologies of Religions* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2007).

³ George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age*, 25th Anniversary Edition (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 2.

model for the purposes of addressing religious pluralism. He holds that our use of myth and metaphor are not meant to be taken at face value, but still they convey meaning. They do so “in terms of eliciting emotions and associations familiar to a group that shares the common context of meanings.”⁴ He reinterprets many traditional doctrines of Christianity to be primarily mythical in nature; in his view, a myth is not literally true, but it “tends to evoke an appropriate dispositional attitude.”⁵ This leads him to strongly affirm that other religions not only can be, but in fact are, true and valid paths to God, or Ultimate Reality as he has come to call it.

In contrast to Hick’s pluralistic position, Hans Küng uses the experiential-expressivist model to support an inclusive approach to religious pluralism. He argues that religions are not merely social conventions external to human beings; rather, they form an integral part of our human experience of reality and meaning. Therefore, he holds that each person may legitimately seek God through that religion in which the “hidden God has already found” that person, at least until they are “confronted in an existential way with the revelation of Jesus Christ.”⁶ However, for Küng, religions have a relative validity; in his terms, Christianity is the “extraordinary” way of salvation, while other religions are “ordinary” ways of salvation. In this sense, Küng is most accurately described as an inclusivist, for in his eyes Christianity remains the fullest revelation of God and the norm by which all other religions and their experiential-expressive power must be evaluated.

As a corrective to the first two models of religious knowledge, Lindbeck proposes a third model, called the “cultural-linguistic model,” which “stresses the degree to which human

⁴ Kärkkäinen, 288.

⁵ John Hick, *The Metaphor of God Incarnate: Christology in a Pluralistic Age* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993), 105.

⁶ Kärkkäinen, 202. He is quoting Küng, “The Freedom of Religions,” in *Attitudes Toward Other Religions: Some Christian Interpretations*, ed. Owen C. Thomas (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), 212-13 and 216.

experience is shaped, molded, and in a sense constituted by cultural and linguistic forms.”⁷ This model affirms that historical considerations, including especially culture and language, enter into all theological investigations. A major part of historical human experience is constituted by culture and language, for without them, we could not make sense of the world or the meaning we find therein. For Lindbeck, religion can be best described as analogous to a culture or language, for it is “a communal phenomenon that shapes the subjectivities of individuals rather than being primarily a manifestation of those subjectivities [as in an experiential-expressivist model].”⁸ A religion makes use of symbols which form a distinctive logic or grammar in terms of which the religion’s vocabulary (language, rituals, narratives, etc.) may be meaningfully used.

In this view, doctrine serves as the regulatory grammar of each religious language and ensures the internal consistency of its vision. For this reason, it is important to note that unless we have the appropriate system of symbols integrated into our lives (and more broadly, into our culture), we will not be able to perceive certain realities. For example, the concept of karma is not able to be meaningfully understood by an American Christian unless he or she has acquired the necessary cultural and linguistic tools and become skilled in their use. Likewise, a Tibetan Buddhist monk may not be able to make sense of the Christian doctrine of the resurrection. This demonstrates that one’s location in history and culture matters a great deal for what one is able to perceive. Lindbeck notes that “to become religious involves becoming skilled in the language, the symbol system of a given religion.”⁹ And since it is only possible to participate in a religion in and through history, we may arrive at the recognition that, due to the vicissitudes of history, our situation in life may not always come from a free decision. Thus, a cultural-linguistic method leads us to be humble in our religious assertions and in dialogue. We should be

⁷ Lindbeck, 20.

⁸ Lindbeck, 19.

⁹ Lindbeck, 20.

respectful and humble not only because God is ultimately the author of our lives and world, not us, but also because we are not totally in control of our cultural and linguistic locations. Our perceptions of religious truth may therefore naturally vary a great deal; once again, we must examine whether this is simply a matter of fact (*de facto*) or of principle (*de iure*).

Conceptions of Truth

This leads us to examine different conceptions of truth. Propositional truth is attributed to religious statements insofar as they correspond ontologically to reality. Each proposition is either eternally true or eternally false. In an experiential-expressivist outlook, truth is a function of symbolic efficacy. Religious symbols are true if they function symbolically to bring a person to an inner experience of the divine. Finally, a cultural-linguistic approach holds that “adequate categories are those which can be made to apply to what is taken to be real, and which therefore make possible, though do not guarantee, propositional, practical, and symbolic truth.”¹⁰

Meaningfulness, then, allows for propositional falsehood as well as truth. As a result, religious language and doctrinal formulations have to be understood anew in every age. They cannot be automatically understood without reflection. Still less can they be automatically translated into other linguistic and cultural systems without any reciprocal influence from those systems.

In order to have an experience, one must have the means for expressing it. On this view, “means of communication and expression are a precondition... for the possibility of experience. We cannot identify, describe, or recognize experience qua experience without the use of signs and symbols.”¹¹ Language and culture, which are always manifested in particular ways in history, are necessary for any experience and knowledge of God. But language and culture are

¹⁰ Lindbeck, 34.

¹¹ Lindbeck, 22.

not monolithic, unchanging realities. We can therefore understand religious change or innovation not merely as proceeding from new experiences, as the experiential-expressivist camp might say, but as resulting from the interactions of a cultural-linguistic religious system with changing historical circumstances.

Does this render the content of religions meaningless or completely relative? Can we even speak of propositional truth in a cultural-linguistic framework? To answer these questions, Lindbeck distinguishes between the “intrasystematic” and the “ontological” truth of statements. The first sees truth as *coherence* within a cultural-linguistic system, and the second sees truth as *correspondence* to reality which, “according to epistemological realists, is attributable to first-order propositions.”¹²

Fundamentally, Lindbeck asserts that coherence is necessary for truth in both religious and non-religious domains. He writes,

Utterances are intrasystematically true when they cohere with the total relevant context, which, in the case of a religion when viewed in cultural-linguistic terms, is not only other utterances but also the correlative forms of life. Thus for a Christian, ‘God is Three and One,’ or ‘Christ is Lord’ are true only as parts of a total pattern of speaking, thinking, feeling, and acting. They are false when their use in any given instance is inconsistent with what the pattern as a whole affirms of God’s being and will.¹³

It is significant that Lindbeck conceives of religious life and doctrine in an integrally related manner. In the case of Christianity, propositional statements about the realities of faith and God are important, but it should be kept in mind that Christianity is not constituted by purely intellectual statements and axioms. Instead, Christians understand God, their lives, and the world through narratives: Scripture, ritual, ecclesial community, and personal experience. None of these can be reduced to propositional statements.

¹² Lindbeck, 50.

¹³ Lindbeck, 50.

Epistemological realism holds that intrasystematic truth is a necessary but not sufficient condition for truth as correspondence to reality. That is, a statement must be intrasystematically true in order to be ontologically true, but it is possible that a statement could be intrasystematically true without being ontologically true. In the latter case, the intrasystematically true statement would be “ontologically false—or, more accurately, meaningless—if it is part of a system that lacks the concepts or categories to refer to the relevant realities, but it is ontologically true if it is part of a system that is itself categorically true (adequate).”¹⁴

In scholastic theology, the term *adequatio* (“adequateness”) meant that “the understanding of the knower must be adequate to the thing to be known.”¹⁵ This rather broad epistemological concept includes a conception of human knowledge as constituted by more than pure intellectual knowledge. To be sure, many scholastics emphasized that the rational nature of humankind validated an epistemological realism which holds that first-order propositions ontologically correspond to reality. But *adequatio* also means that one’s life experiences, as well as the cultural-linguistic tools used to interpret them and which also in some sense constitute them, have a direct bearing on what we are able to perceive and know. For example, this might include something like the concepts of “zero” or “virtue.” Without those concepts, some cultures in history were not able to perceive certain mathematical or ethical truths. More importantly for Christians, the “mental isomorphism of the knowing and the known can be pictured as part and parcel of a wider conformity of self to God.”¹⁶ Religious knowledge is bound up with religious praxis.

¹⁴ Lindbeck, 50-51.

¹⁵ E.F. Schumacher, *A Guide for the Perplexed*, (New York: Harper Perennial, 1977), 38.

¹⁶ Lindbeck, 51.

Language can thus be *performative*: a religious statement “acquires the propositional truth of ontological correspondence only insofar as it is a performance, and act or deed, which helps create that correspondence.”¹⁷ In religions, utterances can function simultaneously performatively and propositionally. The importance of this performative aspect of religious language is that it forces us to recognize that disagreements or contradictions between propositional claims of different religions cannot be resolved only by recourse to intellectual analysis. In large measure, religious truth depends on religious praxis. Therefore, interreligious dialogue must contain an experiential component as well as an intellectual one. Shared stories, experiences, and prayers will all contribute just as much as academic discourse to the fruitfulness of dialogue.

Human Knowledge and Analogical Language

The idea that our knowledge of God rests upon analogical language has deep roots in the Christian tradition. At root, it protects the ineffability and ultimate mystery of God even as it allows us to speak truly about God and his self-revelation and self-gift to us. Following the preceding discussion, we can say that our religious language corresponds to the ontological reality of God only insofar as such language is recognized as fundamentally analogical in nature and also only insofar as our intrasystematic use and practice of such language is coherent.

In a manner similar to Lindbeck, Walter Kasper says propositional statements cannot be lifted out of their historical and cultural contexts and claimed to be valid and true for all people, places, and times. Such a stance mistakes the nature of religious knowledge and language. Therefore, a religion cannot claim to have the perfect, full, and unsurpassable propositional truth. All doctrinal formulations are an attempt to articulate the ultimate truth of reality through

¹⁷ Lindbeck, 51.

concepts, symbols, and words embedded in a particular culture and language. Elaborating on this idea, Kasper says that univocal, absolute propositions rest on the prior foundation of analogical language. He writes,

At first glance, analogous predication may seem to be a derivative and non-literal manner of speaking as compared with unambiguous, univocal predications. In reality, analogy is primary and not secondary in relation to unambiguous, univocal statements. Unambiguous statements are possible only through differentiation from and correlation with other statements. Unambiguousness or univocity thus presupposes comparability, which includes both sameness and difference. Analogy is thus the presupposition and ground of possibility of univocal statements.¹⁸

Against those who wish to assert the univocal, eternal truth of certain religious statements, Kasper demonstrates that all human language is founded on analogy, which occupies a position between univocal and equivocal predications. It is particularly suited to speaking of God, who is infinitely greater than anything that we can speak of. All language of God contains an “is” and an “is not.” Analogical language, therefore, provides a solid foundation while remaining flexible when speaking of God.

Thus, “Our language is not a neutral, objective reflection of reality; it is a subjective ‘achievement’ of human beings who through language are introduced into a historical inter-subjective speech-community and its historical way of life.”¹⁹ Our knowledge and language of God are always mediated through history, culture, and language. This entails change and development. We change our language even as it changes and forms us. In the final analysis for Kasper, “a historical vision of the world signifies that reality is not simply something objectively pre-given, but rather that the subject plays a part in the constitution of the world, just as the

¹⁸ Walter Kasper, *The God of Jesus Christ*, trans. Matthew J. O’Connell (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1984), 95.

¹⁹ Kasper, 91.

subject in its turn is mediated through the world. Thus reality is constituted in a dialectical interplay of world and humanity.”²⁰

Since ultimately all language predicated of God is analogical, meanings of words and symbols will shift throughout time, and each generation of believers will have to renew their religious language. Our metaphors and analogies may not be absolutely univocal for all time, but the changes involved will be continuous nonetheless. If we remain fixated only upon the propositional truth of religious statements, then changes will appear to relativize or trivialize our faith. But if we understand that our cultural-linguistic framework is what makes it possible for us to speak truly in propositional and/or expressive terms, then we can affirm the necessity and indeed the goodness of changes in religious language.

Implications for the Theology of Religions and for Interreligious Dialogue

Can a cultural-linguistic model of religious truth and knowledge be usefully and profitably employed in our attempt to articulate an authentic theology of religions? I believe that it can. First of all, it puts all discussions on the matter into perspective. We can realize that disagreements between religions’ doctrinal positions are not primarily propositional or expressive in nature. Certainly propositional and symbolically expressive truth is at stake, but we cannot entertain speculation on propositional or expressive veracity or falsity without acknowledging that culture and language shape each person in a profound way, even to the point that what we are able to perceive and understand is largely dependent upon the cultural-linguistic tools with which we interpret reality. Therefore, it can safely be said that the various religions are not entertaining the same questions of ultimate meaning. The way in which such concerns are framed cannot be separated from one’s cultural and linguistic identity. Lindbeck notes,

²⁰ Kasper, 107.

“there is a sense in which those unskilled in the language of faith not only fail to affirm but also cannot deny that ‘Jesus is Lord.’”²¹ One must learn the language of a religion ²² sufficiently well in order to understand the propositional meaning of its affirmations and thus be able to accept or reject them.

Lindbeck writes, “Just as grammar by itself affirms nothing either true or false regarding the world in which language is used, but only about language, so theology and doctrine, to the extent that they are second-order activities, assert nothing either true or false about God and his relation to creatures, but only speak about such assertions.” A cultural-linguistic model, therefore, allows for and makes possible propositional truth that ontologically corresponds to reality, but it does not guarantee it. When applied to the discipline of the theology of religions, this model allows for legitimate differences among the religions regarding their varying articulations of ultimate truth. Additionally, it should now be apparent that we cannot presume to know precisely what practitioners of other religions mean without first attempting to listen to their narratives and thereby learn more about the “performative grammar” of their religion. In other words, no religion has the categories in which to identify and describe what is most important for other religions.²³ It seems to me that Lindbeck’s methodology can help to clarify and motivate interreligious debates (and intrareligious ones as well, of course) without dictating the results. Openness, respect, and humility are key ingredients for successful dialogue.

²¹ Lindbeck, 54.

²² It is important to note that “learning the language” of a religion means more than knowing its concepts and practices; *how* to use them is essential, and this includes how to *live* them.

²³ Lindbeck, 132. On this view, exclusive and inclusive positions on the issue of religious pluralism often claim to know too much. As a Christian, my expressions of ultimate meaning cannot serve as *a priori* standards by which other religions must be evaluated. Until authentic dialogue takes place, religious differences remain incommensurate in a sense. However, this does not leave us in a blind relativism, for dialogue provides real mutual understanding upon which subsequent evaluations can be made. The incommensurability fades as dialogue becomes clearer.

Religious truth cannot be reduced to propositions as seen in the cognitive-propositional model; likewise, it cannot be reduced to an efficacious production of religious experience as seen in the experiential-expressivist model. Thus, pluralism *can* be affirmed *de iure*, but it does not necessarily follow that it must be so. In short, a cultural-linguistic model provides ample space for a theology of religious pluralism without automatically presupposing (or demanding) it. It also provides a positive motivation for interreligious dialogue, for we may find that we have more in common than initially thought.

Lastly, a cultural-linguistic model can avoid a sense of imperialism in its approach to other religions. An exclusivist position enters the discussion with all the answers. It is in the position of superiority and offers others a share in the riches of the ultimate truth of which it alone knows. An inclusivist position, in contrast, affirms that other religions may augment the one true religion in some ways, but in the final analysis it is the fulfillment of all the others. In Rahner's notion of the "anonymous Christian," for example, he identifies authentic belief and practice of non-Christians as actually an implicit faith in Jesus Christ. Although it may be true that God is universally operative in people's lives throughout the world, it is in some sense imperialistic to claim to know what any given person is experiencing even if they do not (or even cannot) identify it as such.²⁴

A pluralist position is perhaps the most subtle in its variety of imperialism. Taking Hick as a representative example, we may level the following criticism: "In wanting to promote pluralism, Hick is compelled to deny the validity of the absolutist beliefs of the followers of existing religions and to present his own theocentric model, which equals none of the religions of

²⁴ This is particularly true if we take seriously the idea that our experience is significantly *constituted* by language and culture. We must be sufficiently skilled in a particular grammar in order to perceive certain realities. Therefore, we cannot simply translate one cultural-linguistic system's ideas or terms into those employed by another one without some amount of distortion.

the world; this, of course, is contradictory, since Hick is then in the place of telling others how to believe or at least denigrating the value of their own religions. This posture works against the pluralistic idea.”²⁵ Paul Knitter, a professed pluralist himself, acknowledges the possibility of a “creeping imperialism” within a pluralist position in two ways: “in the way its advocates insist on discovering the common ground they think is necessary for dialogue; and in the way they define and set up the rules of dialogue.”²⁶ I agree with Lindbeck that a cultural-linguistic model can be “either imperialistic or non-imperialistic, either the worst or the best framework for interreligious dialogue.”²⁷ Its openness and neutrality make it an attractive starting point on which to build a theology of religious pluralism.

The Doctrine of the Trinity as the Key to a Theology of Religious Pluralism

I propose that any Christian theology of religions must incorporate in some manner the central doctrinal affirmation that God is triune. The Trinity is such a central symbol and doctrine of our faith that it does not seem possible to negate it and remain authentically Christian. It is the central grammar of our faith. It functions intrasystematically to form us spiritually and ecclesially, and we believe that in some sense it accurately, but not completely, conveys the ontological reality of God’s being. However, as Lindbeck says, we may legitimately distinguish between a doctrine’s essential content and its contingent formulation. Thus, it is possible to formulate the doctrine of the Trinity in different ways. The challenge is to provide adequate formulations of the doctrine that are continuous with previous formulations within the Christian tradition as well as capable of being authentically understood and appropriated in our contemporary lives. In short, the formulation of any doctrine must balance continuity and

²⁵ Kärkkäinen, 293.

²⁶ Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions*, 157.

²⁷ Lindbeck, 126.

fidelity to the tradition with openness to change. Above all, if we view doctrine as our grammar of faith, it must both nourish our faith and adequately describe the reality of the God who has revealed himself to us.

Regarding doctrines as expressing “second-order guidelines for Christian discourse rather than first-order affirmations about the inner being of God”²⁸ means that we do not necessarily need to either absolutize the terminology of Nicaea and Chalcedon or to discard it uncritically. Lindbeck succinctly states that “rule theory... allows (though it does not require) giving these creeds [of Nicaea and Chalcedon] the status that the major Christian traditions have attributed to them, but with the understanding that they are permanently authoritative paradigms, not formulas to be slavishly repeated.”²⁹ The primary distinction, to repeat, is between a doctrine’s essential content and its contingent formulation.

Dupuis’ Trinitarian Christology

It is obviously beyond the scope of this essay to critically examine every facet of how the doctrine of the Trinity should be understood in our times. However, I will draw upon the work of Jacques Dupuis to show that the traditional articulations of the Trinity and the Incarnation remain valid for us today. Furthermore, like Dupuis, I believe that trinitarian theology provides a solid foundation on which to build a theology of religious pluralism.

²⁸ Lindbeck, 80. He believes that this is an ancient insight that is not foreign to early Christian thinkers. For example, he says that Athanasius thought of the doctrine of the Trinity “not as a first-order proposition with ontological reference, but as a second-order rule of speech” (80). However, other patristic writers such as Gregory of Nyssa asserted that God’s self-revelation in the economy of salvation truly revealed who God is in Godself. Our knowledge of the immanent Trinity is founded upon our encounter with the triune God in and through his economic manifestations. Nevertheless, God *in se*, as Absolute Mystery, remains beyond our comprehension while simultaneously revealing himself in time and history as he truly is eternally. We might say that *God loves as he is*. Therefore, the doctrine of the Trinity is not *reduced* to a linguistic rule; it simply provides intrasystematic coherence and makes possible ontological correspondence.

²⁹ Lindbeck, 82.

First of all, Dupuis' approach is to move beyond the existing either-or categories of exclusivism/inclusivism/pluralism or ecclesiocentrism/Christocentrism/theocentrism.³⁰ He holds that they need not be in completely contradictory relationships with one another. Although typologies can be helpful to speak in theological shorthand, it is often the case that a particular thinker will not be easily categorized into any existing typology.³¹ Such is the case with Dupuis. Also, absolutizing the different types of approaches so that they cannot easily converse with each other can be a danger when we uncritically use such typologies. In any case, Dupuis himself notes that

If the perspective to which a Trinitarian Christology is leading needs to be expressed in terms of the models that have become familiar in the theology of religions, the most appropriate term would seem to be that of an 'inclusivist pluralism' that holds together the constitutive and universal character of the Christ-event in the order of human salvation and the salvific significance of religious traditions in a *de iure* plurality of religious traditions within the one manifold plan of God for humankind.

Three items are balanced in Dupuis' statement: (1) the constitutive and universal character of the Christ-event, (2) the salvific significance of religious traditions in a *de iure* plurality of religious traditions, and (3) the one manifold plan of God for humankind. Let us now turn to these three areas to see their contribution to the theology of religions.

³⁰ Kärkkäinen, 207. Terrence Merrigan says that Dupuis "has chosen... to take up a position on the frontier, that is to say, the region 'in-between.' In doing so, he encourages all of us to forego some of our certitude and to accept the challenge of finding our bearings between the Other revealed in Christ, and those others whose demands and achievements can no longer be ignored or minimized" (Terrence Merrigan, "Jacques Dupuis and the Redefinition of Inclusivism," in *In Many and Diverse Ways: In Honor of Jacques Dupuis* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2003), 68). Dupuis himself says that we must also not overemphasize the differences of various theological disciplines to the point of separation. He writes, "Christocentrism and regnocentrism, Christology and Jesuology, Christology and Logology, Christology and pneumatology— all are and ought to be viewed as interrelated aspects and complementary elements of the indivisible, whole, and entire reality; they can only wrongly be set in opposition to one another", in Jacques Dupuis, *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1997), 205.

³¹ One typology which has been influential in explicating the parameters of the debate in the theology of religions is Peter Schinneller, "Christ and Church: A Spectrum of Views," *Theological Studies* 37, no. 4 (December 1976): 545-566.

“The Constitutive and Universal Character of the Christ-Event”

First of all, by the “Christ-event,” Dupuis means the totality of the Incarnation, birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God. It is certainly true that the years following Jesus’ death saw a shift from Jesus’ proclamation of God to the disciples’ proclamation of Jesus as the Christ, the Lord and Savior of humanity. This move is evident even within the New Testament canon. Some theocentric pluralists use this fact to support their claim that the ontological language that came to be used by the early Church, and indeed which was made official at Nicaea and Chalcedon, was a wrong turn. Therefore, we may now legitimately dispense with the ontological claim that Jesus was one in being (*homoousias*) with the Father. We may rather say that Jesus had an incredibly close connection with God and was conscious of God’s presence in profound way. This “degree Christology” of such pluralists such as John Hick holds that the doctrines of the Incarnation and of the Trinity are strictly mythical and not literal. Therefore, “the only meaning of the Trinity is as an expression of a threefold experience of God in the human mind, as Creator, Redeemer and Sanctifier. Neither is there need for a two-nature Christology in the traditional sense. Christ’s ‘divinity’ means that he had a specific God-consciousness, but that does not mean that other religious leaders could not share the same consciousness.”³² In other words, the doctrines of the Incarnation and the Trinity may be linguistic conventions for naming our experience of being related to God through the example of Jesus of Nazareth. However, as propositional statements, they do not correspond to reality. They are simply useful for expressing and creating certain dispositions and attitudes within believers.

Dupuis does not agree with this reductionist approach to the identity and saving work of Jesus Christ. Regarding the Incarnation, Dupuis writes,

³² Kärkkäinen, 291.

We must, no doubt, affirm after John's Prologue a universal presence of the Logos before his incarnation in Jesus Christ (Jn 1:1-4). He is the 'true light that enlightens every human being' (Jn 1:9). This anticipated presence and action of the Logos do not, however, prevent the New Testament from seeing in the Word incarnate, of whom the Prologue of the Johannine Gospel also speaks (1:14), the universal savior of humankind. Christianity has traditionally understood this to mean that the anticipated action of the Word of God is related to the event of Jesus Christ in which God's plan for humankind comes to a climax. The Word-to-be-incarnate and the Word incarnate are one indivisible reality. Jesus Christ, the incarnate Word, remains at the center of God's plan of salvation and of its unfolding in history.³³

In sum, Dupuis holds that Jesus Christ is both constitutive and universal in God's salvation. It is in this sense that Jesus is unique.³⁴ Dupuis says that Jesus' uniqueness must not be construed as absolute. He insists that "what is absolute is God's saving will. Neither absolute nor relative, Jesus' uniqueness is 'constitutive' and 'relational.'"³⁵ By "constitutive," he means that "for Christian faith, the paschal mystery of the death-resurrection of Jesus Christ has, according to God's saving design for humankind, a universal significance; it seals between the Godhead and the human race a bond of union that can never be broken; it constitutes the privileged channel through which God has chosen to share the divine life with human beings."³⁶ The term

³³ Dupuis, *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism*, 196.

³⁴ The use of the term "unique" for Jesus is extremely varied. Some good volumes dedicated to the question of what is meant by Jesus' uniqueness are: Paul Knitter, *No Other Name? A Critical Survey of Christian Attitudes Toward the World Religions* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1985); John Hick and Paul Knitter, eds., *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness: Toward a Pluralistic Theology of Religions* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1987); and Leonard Swidler and Paul Mojzes, eds., *The Uniqueness of Jesus: A Dialogue with Paul F. Knitter* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1997). Clearly, Paul Knitter is a prominent figure in the discussion of Jesus' uniqueness. To give a brief summary of his position, he says that: (1) Given the nature and history of Christology, previous understandings of the uniqueness of Jesus *can* be reinterpreted; (2) Given the ethical imperative of dialogue, previous understandings of the uniqueness of Jesus *must* be reinterpreted; and (3) The uniqueness of Jesus' salvific role can be reinterpreted in terms of *truly* but not *only* (Paul Knitter, "Five Theses on the Uniqueness of Jesus," in *The Uniqueness of Jesus: A Dialogue with Paul F. Knitter*, 3-16).

³⁵ Jacques Dupuis, "Trinitarian Christology as a Model for a Theology of Religious Pluralism," in *The Myriad Christ*, ed. Terrence Merrigan and Jacques Haers (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2000), 96. See also Dupuis, *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism*, 305.

³⁶ Dupuis, *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism*, 305.

“relational” designates “the reciprocal relationship that exists between the path that is in Jesus Christ and the various paths to salvation proposed by the religious traditions to their numbers.”³⁷

Although he agrees that Jesus was entirely “God-centered,” Jesus’ theocentrism cannot be put in antithesis with the equally valid biblical insistence that Jesus Christ is the Way, the Truth, and the Life (Jn 14:6).³⁸ In other words, if we believe that God truly became human through the Incarnation, we cannot divorce the Son from the Father, or Christocentrism from theocentrism. Additionally, we cannot simply say that Jesus was aware of God’s Spirit in a preeminent way. In his trinitarian Christology, Dupuis asserts that

God, and God alone, is the absolute mystery and as such is at the source, at the heart and at the center, of all reality. While it is true that Jesus the man is uniquely the Son of God, it is equally true that God stands beyond Jesus. When he [Jesus] is said to be at the center of the Christian mystery, *this is not to be understood in an absolute sense but in the order of the economy* of God’s freely entertained dealings with humankind in history.³⁹

And regarding the pneumatological aspect of his trinitarian Christology, Dupuis writes that the Spirit is present throughout Jesus’ earthly life, “from his conception through the power of the Spirit (see Lk 1:35) to his resurrection at the hands of God by the power of the same Spirit (see Rom 8:11).”⁴⁰ Theology, Christology, and pneumatology are held together in an integral connection.

This leads us to Dupuis’ affirmation that “a Spirit-Christology cannot stand without a Logos-Christology. Were this to be the case, Jesus Christ would be reduced to a man in whom and through whom God is present and active.... He would not be the Son of God in whom God stands revealed and communicated.”⁴¹ The preexistence of the Logos, the Incarnation of the Logos in Jesus of Nazareth, and the risen Lord, Jesus Christ, are all one reality. It is true that the

³⁷ Ibid., 305.

³⁸ Kärkkäinen, 207.

³⁹ Dupuis, *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism*, 206 (my emphasis).

⁴⁰ Ibid., 206.

⁴¹ Dupuis, *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism*, 198.

Holy Spirit has been active throughout the world in all times and in all people; yet it is also true that the Spirit is sent by the risen Christ (Jn 20:22).

“The Salvific Significance of Religious Traditions in a De Iure Plurality of Religious Traditions”

Trinitarian Christology, Dupuis believes, is able to provide a foundation for a pluralism *de iure* of religious traditions. Religions have their source in the divine manifestation to human beings and the response on the part of humankind. There is thus a divine element and a human element in all religions, and “religious plurality rests... primarily on the superabundant richness and diversity of God’s self-manifestations to humankind.”⁴² God’s infinite goodness and love cannot be completely contained in any particular historical manifestation. The Christian faith holds that Jesus Christ is truly God and truly human, and although God reveals himself through his only Son and in the Holy Spirit, God’s infinite mystery never recedes because of his self-revelation. God is ever greater than we can perceive or comprehend.

Dupuis goes on to assert that “The divine plan for humanity is one, but multifaceted. It belongs to the nature of the overflowing communication of the Triune God to humankind to prolong outside the divine life the plural communication intrinsic to that life itself.”⁴³ The immanent unity and diversity of the triune Godhead extends to the economic manifestations within human history. And let us not forget that humanity is created in the image and likeness of God (Gen 1:26). Therefore, the diversity within the Trinity leads us to expect and accept diversity on the human level. Such diversity includes cultures, languages, and religions. Thus,

⁴² Jacques Dupuis, “Trinitarian Christology as a Model for a Theology of Religious Pluralism,” in *The Myriad Christ*, ed. Terrence Merrigan and Jacques Haers (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2000), 96.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 96.

we can affirm the reality and the goodness of religious pluralism *de iure*. We should also be hopeful that our interreligious dialogue will lead us to greater unity.

One Economy of Salvation: "The One Manifold Plan of God for Humankind"

Dupuis is deeply convinced that Christian identity and belief is fully compatible with a genuine recognition of other religions, for they constitute different but related facets of the "self-disclosure of the Absolute Mystery in a single, but complex and articulated divine economy."⁴⁴ Against those who tend to separate pneumatological approaches from Christological ones, he firmly believes that Christians should affirm the universal action of the Spirit throughout human history, both before and after the Christ-event's occurrence in history. The action of the Spirit and the action of Jesus Christ are distinct but remain complementary and inseparable. In Dupuis' words, "Pneumatocentrism and Christocentrism cannot, therefore, be construed as two distinct economies of salvation, one parallel to the other. They constitute two inseparable aspects, or complementary elements, within a unique economy of salvation."⁴⁵ Thus, the universal action of the Spirit cannot be severed from the universal action of the risen Christ.⁴⁶

Dupuis links the immanent and economic spheres of the Trinity. He says that there is a necessary correspondence between the mystery of the triune God *in se* and the mystery of God's manifestation in the world.⁴⁷ He takes it as certain that "the Holy Spirit is God's 'point of entry' wherever and whenever God reveals and communicates himself to people."⁴⁸ Yet it must be kept in mind that the Spirit does not operate separately from God. To say that Christians are saved by Jesus Christ while people of other religions are saved by the Spirit is to step beyond the

⁴⁴ Dupuis, *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism*, 210.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 197.

⁴⁶ Kärkkäinen, 212.

⁴⁷ Dupuis, *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism*, 197.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 197.

legitimate hypostatic differentiation between the two Persons of the Trinity. And to say that salvation is only properly spoken of as coming from God the Father is to ignore the revelation of the Son and the Spirit as co-divine with the Father. In short, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit work together in all of human history in one unique economy of salvation to bestow blessings upon all of God's people.

Because of God's universal presence and will to save, people of other religions are saved in and through their own religions. Interreligious dialogue is possible and fruitful because all of humanity is in communion with each other through God's infinite goodness and closeness. Therefore, Dupuis says that "interreligious dialogue is a form of sharing, both receiving and giving... it is not a one-way process, not a monologue but a dialogue.... *Dialogue makes explicit this already existing communion in the reality of salvation*, which is the Reign of God that had come for all in Jesus."⁴⁹ The notion of humankind's communion in the reality of salvation, which is already present and yet not finished, is for Dupuis more foundational than our differences in creed, ritual, language, or doctrine. If we truly believe that God is everywhere and wills the salvation of all, then we can find no surer foundation on which to build a theology of religious pluralism.

Conclusions

Although much more could be said about the interaction of George Lindbeck's cultural-linguistic model of religious knowledge and Jacques Dupuis' trinitarian Christology as a model for a theology of religious pluralism, it is my hope that this essay has provided a basic overview of how the work of these two thinkers might work together. In summary, a cultural-linguistic model does not provide conclusions in advance for the theology of religions. Rather, it allows a

⁴⁹ Dupuis, *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism*, 246 (my emphasis).

freedom in which to explore how doctrines might be formulated in order to remain true to the inherited tradition, to contemporary religious experience, and to the situation of religious pluralism. It also allows for and encourages interreligious dialogue, which can foster mutual cooperation and respect, as well as the ability to understand and employ other religions' cultural and linguistic grammar.

In the case of Christianity, trinitarian theology is central. It is the primary grammar of our faith. As such, we may legitimately inquire into whether the doctrine of the Trinity ontologically corresponds to the reality of God. Jacques Dupuis is one pluralist theologian who believes that it does, and I am inclined to agree with him. In addition to being a central belief of Christian faith, it can also provide a firm foundation on which to build a Christian theology of religious pluralism. God is one and yet triune; there are different yet convergent paths to salvation. Lindbeck's model affirms the possibility of these statements, and Dupuis' theology demonstrates its content and form.

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