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Toward an Adequate Model for the  
Theology of Religions

Derek Michaud  
Boston University,

# **Toward an Adequate Model for the Theology of Religions<sup>1</sup>**

Derek Michaud  
PhD (ABD), Theology  
Boston University  
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This paper is an exercise in the Christian (meta)theology of religions. As such, it rests on the idea that systematic theology must take account of the fact of religious pluralism within its articulation of the Christian faith. It might be asked however, despite clear motivations such as the traditional imperative of mission, why we need a theology of religions at all. Why not simply dialogue or engage in a kind of comparative study of the texts and practices of the religions? On the contrary, the fact of religious pluralism requires at least a basic or schematic response in the present, and not only in the always-postponed-future that makes true dialogue and comparative theology possible and fruitful. While remaining open to new developments that may arise out of the necessary work of dialogue and comparative theology, the theology of religions can, and should, provide an intellectual resting place, albeit a temporary one, as we shall see.

Moreover, the fact of religious pluralism is itself a theological issue that prompts a systematic response. In addition, any dialogue and/or comparative work will in fact operate from a kind of implicit or explicit theology of religion from the beginning. It is a worthwhile endeavor therefore to analyze the major living models for such work to see

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<sup>1</sup> This essay began life as a much larger term paper written for Dr. John H. Berthrong at Boston University. Whatever is insightful in my critique of current models in the theology of religions I owe to him. Any shortcomings remain, of course, my own. Thanks are also owed to the participants at the 2008 Engaging Particularities Conference at Boston College. I have tried to address some of the concerns of those in attendance but I have not made significant changes to my paper. In this respect I continue to place special weight on the “toward” in my title. The paper is meant to provoke thought and so is intellectually loose and playful in many respects. I encourage readers to “play” along with me before taking a critical eye to my musings. I welcome comments, playful and critical, at [dmichaud@bu.edu](mailto:dmichaud@bu.edu).

which, if any, provide a helpful guide to intellectually honest and morally justified work in the field.

Typologies are helpful as guides for reflection. This is so because, among other things, the theology of religions is extraordinarily complex as it involves consideration of all other areas in systematic theology, as well as religious practice, as they relate to the fact and composition of other religious traditions. Just as basic models or approaches can help us get clear about other areas in systematic theology so too can they be useful as tools for thinking about our responses to religious pluralism.

By analyzing the four types of theology of religions identified by Paul F. Knitter in terms of their respective claims about what Paul Tillich called the existential questions and their religious answers embraced by religious traditions the two most popular liberal approaches, fulfillment (or inclusivism) and mutuality (or pluralism), will be shown to be conceptually identical and untenable.<sup>2</sup> For this reason, they ought to be abandoned as approaches to the theology of religions. Likewise, both replacement and acceptance models will be found wanting in the respect that they entail ethical or normative problems. These models are simultaneously recommended however by strong ethical and normative strengths. Given this seeming impasse an argument for a paradoxical approach, combining both replacement and acceptance models, will be made as a potentially fruitful way forward that benefits from Knitter's typology while advancing beyond existing models.

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<sup>2</sup> Paul F. Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2002); Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951) 1:59-66.

## Method

Like all theological work, especially when that work operates at a relatively high level of abstraction, this paper has certain fundamental assumptions.

(1) The distinctiveness of the religions, *qua* religions and as defined by their adherents, outweighs their similarities. This point is defensible on empirical, conceptual, and ethical grounds but it is largely assumed for the purposes of this paper. Irreducible “particularity” on the part of the religions is suggested but not demonstrated here.

(2) That models or types can be analyzed at a high level of abstraction and generalization and that the results of such an analysis can be a helpful guide to the actual work of the theology of religions. That is, the analysis of models does not take into account the nuance that exists in all examples of each model. This kind of “engagement” is assumed valid.

(3) As a matter of method, religions represent worldviews and ways of life and, as such, they involve what I will call questions and answers. **Religious questions** are the basic items of a tradition’s understanding of the human and/or cosmic situation (or predicament) *and* related practices. Examples include the Christian concept of sin as well as the pan-Indian concepts of *samsara* and *maya*. **Religious answers** are the tradition’s understanding of the solution(s) or end(s) of the human and/or cosmic situation *and* related practices. Examples include the Christian concepts of salvation, communion, heaven and hell, as well as the pan-Indian concept of *moksha*.<sup>3</sup> There is a theory about the actual relationship between the religions implicit within each model theology of religions.

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<sup>3</sup> A complete set of questions and answers for a given religion includes both “soteriological” dimensions (anthropology, sin, anxiety, Christology, atonement, etc.) and “eschatological” dimensions (life, life after death, heaven, hell, purgatory, the end times, second coming etc.) both of which involve “ends” or “answers” and what could be called “beginnings” “questions.”

These theories give a kind of utility to the models in that they provide answers to our questions about religious pluralism. They make claims about the relationship between religious questions and answers to Christian questions and answers. They are guides because they seem already to know the proper way forward in the encounter between the religions.

### **Analysis of the Models**

I will use Knitter's four-fold typology of theologies of religion rather than the more traditional three-part typology of exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism<sup>4</sup> because it accounts for recent developments in postmodern and post-liberal theology, is more descriptive of the actual theologies, and minimizes the negative stereotyping associated with the older labels. Knitter's models are **replacement**, **fulfillment**, **mutuality**, and **acceptance**. For each model, Knitter also distinguishes between different kinds of approaches that share the basic outlook of the model. In this paper, even this modest level of specificity will not be addressed.

There are four logically possible sets of religious questions and religious answers. These are **same/same**, **same/different**, **different/same**, and **different/different**, where "same" means that the question or answer is in substantial agreement with Christianity and "different" means that the question or answer is substantially different from Christianity. It is, of course, extremely difficult to determine when or if different

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<sup>4</sup> Alan Race, *Christians and Religious Pluralism: Patterns in the Christian theology of religions* 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1993).

religions share elements in common or not.<sup>5</sup> The actual state of things is open to interpretation, but the models do yield basic conclusions about the relationship between Christianity and other religions.

In what follows each model is described briefly and the four possible sets of questions and answers are tested by the internal logic of the models thereby eliminating those sets that are precluded on their own terms.<sup>6</sup> The remaining sets are also analyzed in terms of their agreement with the hypothesis of irreducible particularity.<sup>7</sup>

The **replacement model** maintains that other religions' doctrines and practices are in some way fundamentally deficient and untrue. This approach accounts for the non-Christian religions by appealing to the concepts of sin, idolatry, and error. In short this model can be summarized as; only Christianity is true, salvation through Christ and the Church is the only valid religious answer (or end), and only those who are Christians will

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<sup>5</sup> The identity of "Christianity" or "Christians" need not trouble us here. However this is understood, the analysis of the models stands. It might be suggested, as it was at the conference presentation of this paper, that a third "analogical" judgment might be fruitful in this analysis. Religious questions and/or answers might not be essentially the same or different but might instead be analogous in some sense. This is an important point that deserves additional consideration but for now I offer the following two points in defense of my methods. First, to interpret religious questions and/or answers as analogous seems to abstract from the religions themselves. That is, such a move seems to provide greater understanding at the expense of ignoring the way the religions understand themselves. Second, concepts (questions and/or answers) may be vaguely or functionally analogous without actually being similar in character at all. This kind of analogous similarity is dealt with by means of the categories of religious questions and answers (where ideas such as sin and maya may be analogous in religious function but they are not in any obvious way similar as concepts).

<sup>6</sup> This analysis is, of course, only as good as the conceptions of the models addressed. A full defense of the general line of thinking presented here would require something like an objective reading of the various theologies of religions. As was pointed out by a conference participant it is an open question at the very least if Knitter's assessment and characterization of the models is free from damaging bias.

<sup>7</sup> Knitter provides a generally reliable assessment of each of his four models (including their strengths and weaknesses) in chapters 3, 6, 9, and 12 in *Introducing Theologies of Dialogue*. Therefore, the various critiques posed by others will not be addressed here. Furthermore, it is (perhaps) more consistent to apply a single method to all the models as I have attempted here than to attack them all willy-nilly.

be saved. This model strongly implies that it is incumbent upon Christians to share their faith with others and whenever possible to convert them to the Way.<sup>8</sup>

The replacement model explicitly rejects the sets different/same and same/same. This model can allow, therefore, for only two possibilities; other religions ask the same questions and arrive at different answers or they ask different questions and arrive at equally different answers. Given the assumption of particularity, we can eliminate the set same/different as an empirical possibility even while it remains a conceptually coherent option within this model. Thus, the replacement model would seem to point to the conclusion that the religious questions and answers of other faiths are fundamentally different from those of Christianity.<sup>9</sup>

The **fulfillment model** generally holds that whatever is good or true in non-Christian religions is due to the saving power and grace of Jesus Christ. As Knitter says, “the one fulfills the many.”<sup>10</sup> Perhaps the most notable single voice in favor of this

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<sup>8</sup> Knitter, Part I, 19-60. Perhaps the most famous modern exponent of this view was a kind of caricature of Karl Barth. More recent scholarship however suggests that this idea rests on faulty translation from Barth’s German. See his *On Religion: The Revelation of God as the Sublimation of Religion*, trans. and intro. Garrett Green (London; New York: T&T Clark, 2006). The picture of Barth that develops from this work is one of a kind of combination of replacement and fulfillment models.

<sup>9</sup> The fact that it is debated even among “Christians” who is and who is not a member of the Church does not lessen this point. All groups that employ this model or any other to understand others will delineate themselves in their own ways, calling themselves whatever label(s) they see fit. These models operate from within a particular confessional framework only. They are not, nor could they be, models with a privileged view from “above” the particular religious tradition they are employed from. This is not so much a weakness in the methods of this essay as it is an admission that what is being engaged in here is theology with all the normative commitments that go along with the field. Furthermore, even secular religious studies scholars often admit in today’s postmodern context that they cannot escape their own biases and commitments.

<sup>10</sup> Knitter, 61.

model was Karl Rahner whose appreciation of the maxim “all grace is Christ’s grace” led him to the controversial theory of “anonymous Christians.”<sup>11</sup>

The fulfillment model explicitly rejects the set same/different as well as different/different in its insistence that the truly fruitful answers people encounter in their religious lives are provided through, or indeed are, Christ and the Holy Spirit, whether they know it or not. Furthermore, this model would seem to deny the set same/same since it clearly recognizes that followers of other faiths may live righteous lives without even knowing why. In a sense however the fulfillment model can be seen as positing a same/same scheme in so far as it is natural human longing that is answered by grace. This possible interpretation does not follow however because it appeals to principles more universal than the religions. It is not as a member of another faith tradition that the “same” questions arise, it is as a human being. This interpretation of the model would therefore have more to do with apologetics than theology of religions. The fulfillment model can allow for one possibility; other *religions* ask different questions, and they arrive at ultimately the same answers – when and to the extent that such answers are good, beautiful, and true. The fulfillment model suggests that the religious questions of other faiths (*qua* other faiths not of people *qua* human) are significantly different from those of Christianity while affirming that anything good in them is due to the answers provided through (Christian) grace (therefore *largely* the same as Christian answers).

The **mutuality model** maintains that although the various religions are distinct, their differences lie merely in there culturally determined response(s) to a single Reality. It is the common goal (answer) of all religions to achieve what John Hick calls “reality

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<sup>11</sup> Knitter, 72, 73. See also, Karl Rahner, “Christianity and the non-Christian Religions,” in *Theological Investigations* (Baltimore: Helicon Press, 1966) 5:115-134.

centeredness”<sup>12</sup> approached via many different forms of religious questioning. This approach can be interpreted as accepting a same/same scheme but only when interpreted at the level of a more general philosophy or anthropology of religion. The religions as such offer different questions at least for the mutuality model even though at a higher level of abstraction all religious people seek to be centered in “reality”.

The mutuality model rejects the set same/different as well as different/different by insisting that all religions have as their ultimate object or answer the same reality for which the various traditions are culturally relative expressions. In addition, this model seems to disregard the possibility of the set same/same since it explicitly acknowledges the differences between the various religions especially in terms of their questions. The mutuality model can allow for one possibility; other religions ask different questions and arrive at ultimately the same answers.

Both the fulfillment and the mutuality models suggest the set different/same after our correlational analysis. To this extent, they have a deep similarity. The primary difference between them is that fulfillment sees the proper end of all the religions within, or in terms of, Christianity (often specifically Roman Catholicism) and the mutuality model sees the proper end of all the religions within a kind of vague or more basic meta-theology of the Real. Setting aside for a moment the matter of Christian identity (and pretending this can be done!) the models seem to be conceptually identical in that they both call for the consummation of all the religions in another better theology (which also

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<sup>12</sup> Knitter, 109-169. John Hick has become perhaps the leading figurehead for this sort of understanding of religious pluralism. See his *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989) and *A Christian Theology of Religions: The Rainbow of Faiths*. (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1995).

colors their assessment of practice where it is not explicitly determined by such a theology).

Given our previous decision to eliminate the replacement model set same/different on the grounds of the irreducible particularity of the religions it seems that the all of sets for both the fulfillment and mutuality models have been eliminated as empirical possibilities and thus the models should be disregarded completely. This is not to say that fulfillment and/or mutuality models do not contribute positively to current interreligious dialogue or that they are not fruitful expressions of personal or even corporate piety in this area. It is rather that these models seem inadequate in terms of their ability to represent the reality of the various religious traditions, as they understand themselves. That is to say, these models while admittedly useful in many circumstances have certain limits too, especially when subjected to the analytical methods used here.

At this point, however, we can no longer avoid discussion of the basis of our assumption of particularity in at least some detail. In indulging in this brief aside, the real driving question is in fact; is the elimination of the two most common “liberal” theologies of religion warranted? Numerous studies in the fields of anthropology, sociology, religion, folklore, mythology, history, and philosophy attest to the fact that members of different religious traditions hold different conceptions of reality, humanity, “God”, and the universe.<sup>13</sup> These examples could be listed indefinitely but the fact that we speak of

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<sup>13</sup> For example, Diana Eck, *A New Religious America: How a “Christian Country” Has Become the World’s Most Religiously Diverse Nation* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001), details the phenomenon of increasing religious pluralism in America. *Radical Pluralism and Truth: David Tracy and the Hermeneutics of Religion*. Edited by Werner G. Jeanrond & Jennifer L. Rike (New York: Crossroad, 1991) includes articles by numerous prominent scholar’s including Rike’s “Introduction: Radical Pluralism and Truth in the Thought of David Tracy” (ix-xxvii) which highlights the radical sense in which religions differ as a challenge to Christian theology and other essays speak to this equally well. The difference between new religions and old is addressed in *New Religions and New Religiosity* edited by Eileen Barker and Margit Warburg. (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 1998) with numerous articles from sociologists of

religions as different religions suggests that they have only a formal, abstract, resemblance to each other. Particularity also seems recommended on moral grounds. Our estimates of others should be recognizable by them and should not be influenced by over eager comparisons and interpretations of similarity. These considerations support disregarding any set including “same” leaving only four logical possibilities remaining within the universe of sets, all of which are different/different.<sup>14</sup>

The **acceptance model** asserts the radical plurality of all religious paths.<sup>15</sup> George Lindbeck (who effectively “launched this model”) maintains that the solution to the dilemma facing those theorists who seek to resolve the problem of the one and the many is not to bother. In other words, religions are different because they really *are* different, period.<sup>16</sup> Heim has suggested that a helpful way to avoid all the pitfalls of the other models for theology of religion is to assert that all religions are equally valid paths

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religion. *Identity and Religion: International, Cross-Cultural Approaches* edited by Hans Mol (London, Beverly Hills: Sage Publications Ltd., 1978) discusses pluralism in terms of its effects on individual group identity. *The Dawn of Religious Pluralism: Voices from the World’s Parliament of Religions, 1893*. edited by with introductions by Richard Hughes Seager, with the assistance of Ronald R. Kidd, foreword by Diana L. Eck (LaSalle, Illinois: Open Court, 1993) tells the story of the first parliament of religions held in Chicago. The mere fact that a parliament was deemed necessary would seem to hint strongly at the awareness of profound differences among the religions that are worth talking about. Essays in the dated but useful *Readings in the Psychology of Religion* edited by Orlo Strunk, Jr., (New York, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1959) provide insight into the study of the plurality of religious experience carried out by psychologists, most notably William James.

<sup>14</sup> The basic argument of this paper might have been explored by simply asserting this strong sense of the hypothesis of particularity from the beginning and thereby avoiding any treatment of all sets containing “same” in either the question or answer position. This approach might have been taken but in the process the internal message of these two commonly accepted models would have gone unexplored. I offer the additional analysis based on my hypothesis of particularity in order to reassure, to the extent that is possible, the reader that I do not take dismissing these positions lightly.

<sup>15</sup> Knitter, 173-237.

<sup>16</sup> Knitter, 177. See also George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984) and “The Gospel’s Uniqueness: Election and Untranslatability.” *Modern Theology* 13 (1997): 423-450.

to different goals. To use the language I have developed here, religions have different questions and different answers and they “work” together equally well.<sup>17</sup>

The acceptance model rejects the sets same/same, same/different, and different/same by insisting that the religious ends of the various traditions really do differ from each other, and what is more, that the questions the traditions ask are also different. The acceptance model allows for one possibility; other religions ask different questions and arrive at equally different answers.

After correlational analysis and the application of our principle of irreducible particularity, two possible sets remain out of the initial sixteen. These are, **replacement-different/different** and **acceptance-different/different**. While both agree in conceptual correlational terms about the relationship between Christianity and the other religions, they disagree deeply about the possibility of other faiths’ truth, beauty, and goodness. The replacement model denies the truth of other paths while the acceptance model sees them as valid paths leading to other ends.

## **A Proposal**

It would seem that we have exhausted the usefulness of our methods. Choosing one or the other of the models is open to the criticisms of each expressed in Knitter’s *Introducing Theologies of Dialogue*. The replacement option is questionable on ethical grounds (in as much as it sets up a hierarchical and potentially oppressive conception of the religions), and the acceptance option carries the requirement of abandoning or

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<sup>17</sup> S. Mark Heim, *Salvations: Truth and Difference in Religion*. (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1995). In Heim’s more recent *The Depth of Riches: A Trinitarian Theology of Religious Ends* (Grand Rapids, Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2001) he begins to verge on the fulfillment model in as far as he finds the other religion’s ends “within” the Trinity.

significantly modifying the normative claim that Christianity is in fact “true” and for this reason superior.<sup>18</sup> Dismissing both, on the other hand, would be to disallow that any good has or can come from them, and this would deny the importance for a believer of affirming the truth of their faith (a strength of the replacement model) and the need to acknowledge the truth(s) in other traditions (a strength of the acceptance model). It would seem desirable, therefore, to maintain both. Is it possible for these two seemingly contradictory positions to both be maintained without falling completely into unintelligibility?

Fortunately, Christian theology has an example of this kind of paradox in the orthodox doctrine of the Incarnation. Just as it is *logically* contradictory to maintain that Jesus Christ is both fully human and fully divine, it is *logically* problematic to maintain that Christianity is both the one true religious path with no second *and* that each religion offers its own truth that is just as valid as any other.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Paul Griffiths’ call for serious apologetics in an “acceptance” model framework notwithstanding. Knitter, 185-187; Paul Griffiths, *An Apology for Apologetics: A Study in the Logic of Interreligious Dialogue* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1991).

<sup>19</sup> Erik Ranstrom in his generous and insightful response to my paper questioned the extent to which the incarnation remains an unspeakable paradox for Christian theology and thus the reason why my proposed model does not settle the question that calls for a theology of religions in the first place. He referenced the work of Thomas Aquinas in this respect as an example of how clear and (presumably) definitive statements can in fact be made about this mystery. I take it that the basic paradoxical nature of any coincidence of opposites (Bonaventure, Nicholas of Cusa, etc.), such as in the case of Chalcedonian christology, is not actually at issue here but Mr. Ranstrom raises an excellent point. All I can say in response is that while it is true that the mystery of the incarnation does not lead to silence in the way that my proposed model does it should be remembered that just as my model calls for lived engagement and dialogue in order to bear fruit the doctrine of the incarnation required the blood of the martyrs, the sweat of the Fathers, and the collected wisdom of the catholic Church over the course of centuries to find intelligible form. It is not necessarily a weakness of my model therefore that I do not provide definite answers to the theological questions arising from religious diversity. Far from it, in postponing such judgments my model remains open to the unfolding understanding that *is* the history of the development of doctrine. Furthermore, without unduly ending the project of the theology of religions by presuming to have a fully intelligible position already worked out (a central issue in my critique of other existing models) my model remains open to correction by and in interreligious dialogue as well as by the critical self-reflection that such dialogue motivates. I should also note that much of my quasi-scholastic methodology is meant to

Perhaps what is needed is precisely not a logically coherent model but one that remains a paradox and a scandal; a theo-logical model that serves the function of a model but does not resolve the tensions encountered in religious pluralism by undue adherence to the laws of (Aristotelian) logic. A model that shrinks under its own weight and empties itself of question ending power. A model that in this shrinking - this breaking - forces us to wrestle continually with our own identity, self-understanding, and our relation to other people of faith especially when their faith is decidedly different from our own.

What is called for is a model that gives us a place to rest, but not for long. A model that perpetually throws us out into dialogue and comparative study and which thus fuels the never-ending work of theology. A model, suggested by our analysis here, and inspired by the central Christian doctrine of the incarnation, that combines the instincts of both the replacement and acceptance approaches. Such a model would promote a “pious humility” simultaneously rooted in a deep commitment to the truth, goodness, and beauty of Christianity (piety) and radically open to the possibility of truths, goods, and beauties in other traditions (humility).<sup>20</sup>

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suggest the failure of exactly the kind of question settling theology Ranstrom points to. In a weak sense at least, my argument proceeds by way of *reductio ad absurdum*.

<sup>20</sup> I owe the phrase “pious humility” to my colleague at Boston University Catherine Hudak. Her ability to add to the understanding of my proposed model through dialogue is an excellent example of the kind of dynamic approach I mean to suggest is called for in the theology of religions.