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Chapter 7: Theology of Religions

During the time of Christendom, the Western world had embraced Christianity and overlooked all other religions. At the time, there was no need in that context to proactively understand various religious theologies in the world because none of them were posing a threat to the established Christian religion. However, in an era of postmodernism, relativistic pluralism, and cultural diversity there is no longer an excuse to excuse the other dominant religions in the world. In order to claim Christ as Lord with full confidence not only pastors, but all believers should have a general understanding of the global religions that exist today. In chapter 7 of "World Missions - A Trinitarian Missiology for the 21st Century" author Timothy C. Tennent identifies these various perspectives in a theology of religion and critiques each of them, ultimately supporting an evangelical theology of religion.

Tennent begins by unpacking the relationship between a theology of culture and a theology of religions. While religion can be seen as a subset of culture, it is important to note the religion can be transcultural. For example, Christianity and Islam are both religions that are revelations that go beyond one culture into another. Therefore, it is important to separately create a theology for religions. The author does so by created four categories for viewing religion: Exclusivism, Inclusivism, Pluralism, and Postmodern/Acceptance Model.

The Exclusivism or the Replacement Model focuses on the unique authority of Jesus Christ. This conservative perspective of Christianity states that Jesus is the ultimate revelation of God and that only through him is humanity saved. They also believe that the historical death and resurrection of Jesus was the most important moment in human history. This contradicts the inclusive view of religion and calls for a complete separation between the glory of God and the human race. There are some in the exclusivism camp who state that the other religious perspective hold mutual truths, but even so, fall short of the saving grace of Christ.

The Inclusivism or the New Fulfillment Model agrees with the exclusivism model that Jesus is the definitive revelation of God and that the cross is at the center of salvation. In contrast to the exclusivism camp, inclusivists believe that general revelation is a part of the human experience. Their argument is that if Jesus died for the world, then the opportunity for salvation should also be universal. This concept of universal access to the gospel extends to other religions, meaning that the general revelation of Jesus Christ is a hidden in other faiths, as well as nature and all of creation.

Pluralism or the Mutuality Model rejects all of the claims made by the exclusivism party. They believe that all religions are relative and that they all speak to a general truth about salvation. The world religions are a progressive revelation of the same God and no religion has a right to authoritative claims of absolute truth. In addition, the Bible and its New Testament Scripture is believed to have no objective authority above any other religious text. The pluralist mindset is that all religions lead to the same God.

The Postmodern or Acceptance Model is a fourth view that is not often included in the classical threefold perspective of world religion studies. The postmodern perspective acknowledges the belief that it is arrogant to assume that one religion would be able to claim absolute truth. At the same time, they also acknowledge that each religion is not the same when seeking the deeper meaning of life. In other words, the Acceptance Model states that all religions are not reconcilable. Similar to the analogy of the neighbor talking to another over their fence, people of this perspective hold to the idea that world religions should be cordial with one another, but never attempt to reconcile on common interests without risking reductionism.

I personally cannot begin to reconcile the pluralistic perspective. To say that all religions lead to the same God is to say nothing at all. If we are to believe that God has revealed Himself through the scriptures and through the revelation of Jesus Christ, there is no room left to make a reasonable claim that another faith is also true. The glaringly obvious example is Judaism and Christianity. One faith believes that Jesus is the Messiah and faith in him leads to salvation. The other faith is still awaiting their savior and believe they are the chosen nation of God. While all faiths have common principles and commandments, it doesn't make them the same. Just because two things have similarities doesn't mean they are the same thing.

I was surprised with the Postmodern perspective. Prior to learning about it, I was expecting it to carry more of the beliefs that are a part of the Pluralist model. Instead, I appreciate and agree with the party's acknowledgement that all religions fundamentally support different beliefs. Rather than trying to reconcile the unreconcilable, the Postmodern perspective aims to create a cordial approach to differences while each religion seeks to encourage others to walk in their faith perspective.

However, the issue I take up with the Postmodern model is that it rejects objective revelation as the basis for truth. Instead, as Tennent explains, the model adjusts the definition of truth by, "...redefining truth as socially constructed narratives" (Tennent Loc 2264). This means that the historical significance of the resurrection that Christians claimed occurred in history is merely refuted as a social construct or teaching. Where faith is encouraged

in historical truth of the incarnation, the postmodern applies suspicion and unbelief.

I subscribe to the exclusivist position because it affirms the authority of Scripture as the revealed Word of God, supports the centrality of Christ as savior, and the importance of his death and resurrection.