



Studies & articles

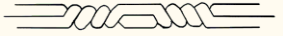
Towards an Orthodox Theology of Religions: The Model of “Empathic Exclusivism”

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Abstract: The paper claims that the discipline called “History and Philosophy of Religions” (HPR, abbreviated IFR in Romanian), as currently taught in Romanian Faculties of Orthodox Theology, is inadequate and insufficient. Its methodological approach does not meet the educational requirements of future Orthodox priests and theologians. IFR is (more or less implicitly) based on the tripartite methodology used by Mircea Eliade: historical, phenomenological, hermeneutical. This is simply not enough. While it may be maintained as a foundation, an additional discipline needs to be introduced in the curriculum: the Orthodox Theology of Religions. A few taxonomies of the discipline “Theology of Religions” are briefly presented, as proposed by heterodox theologians during the last decades in order to classify the existing approaches. The well-known threefold paradigm (Alan Race) – **exclusivism** (Kraemer, Newbigin, Barth), **inclusivism** (Rahner, Dupuis, Pannenberg, Farquhar), **pluralism** (Hick, Knitter, Panikkar, Troeltsch, Küng) – is followed by the fourfold one (Knitter) (**replacement, fulfilment, mutual enrichment, acceptance**), and variations thereof (Di

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Tora, D'Costa). Short but clearcut critiques of inclusivist and pluralist heresies are included. Reference is also made to the *Extra Ecclesiam nulla salus* and *Ecclesia ab Abel* theses. The promising approach of Comparative Theology (J. Fredericks, F. Clooney, J. Berthrong, R.C. Neville, D. Burrell, L. Lefubre, P. Valkenberg, M. Barnes, J. Keenan, S. Painadath, F. Veneeth, J. Pathrapankal, K. von Stosch) is also introduced. Finally the paper proposes an outline of what could be an Orthodox approach: the "Empathic Exclusivism" model: salvation is only in Christ, like in the exclusivist model. Christianity is uniquely based on the divine revelation through the Incarnation. The other religions have no salvific value per se, they are not ways of salvation. However, the attitude of the Orthodox toward the pagan believers is to be one of empathy, trying to identify, understand, and theologically interpret, in the light of Biblical and Patristic tradition, whatever "seeds of the Logos" (St Justin the Martyr) their religious traditions may have preserved from the original Adamic monotheism. The goal of such an approach is to facilitate Orthodox mission, aimed at helping to "graft" Christianity onto those traditions, and to bridge the cultural gap for pagans who wish to become Orthodox. This is a major challenge to Orthodox theology today.

Keywords: *Theology of Religions, Empathic Exclusivism, taxonomies, Orthodox theology*

1. The inadequacy of the History and Philosophy of Religions to the needs of Orthodox theological education

Currently, in all Romanian Faculties of Orthodox Theology, the discipline called "History and Philosophy of Religions" (HPR) is part of the compulsory curriculum.

Upon closer inspection, this discipline appears to be somewhat inadequate for the educational needs of future theologians and priests. HPR (or IFR, as it is known in our faculties) merely presents a historical evolution of world religions. Its method is approximately and intuitively based on the triple methodology applied by Mircea Eliade: historical, phenomenological, hermeneutical:

The 3 levels of the methodological approach
to the History of Religions, as applied by Mircea Eliade

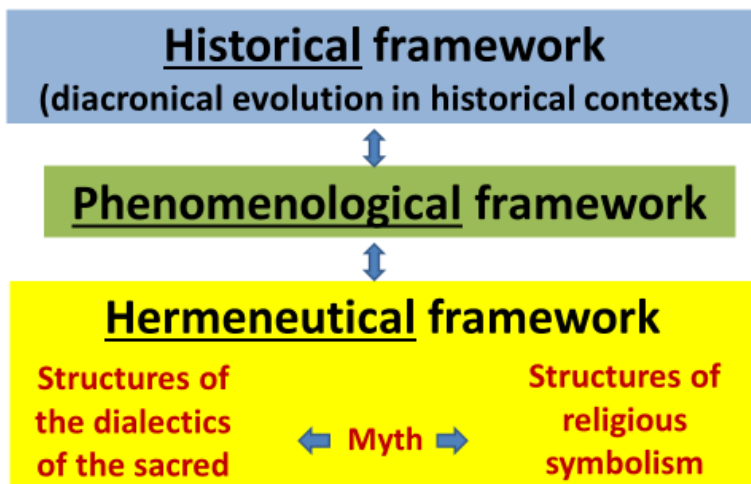
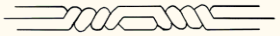


Figure 1: The triple methodological framework applied to the History of Religions by Mircea Eliade

Source: A scheme created by the author of this paper, based on suggestions made by Douglas Allen in „Eliade’s Hermeneutics and the Reception of the History of Religion”, in Ries & Spineto (2003), 245-246.

Eliade proposed a „comparative typological” method, based on which he outlined a common prototype of the most diverse religions, cosmogonic myths and religious traditions of the world: *homo symbolicus* or *homo religiosus*. Without minimalizing the historical and cultural aspects of religious phenomena, he insists on their inner symbolic coherence, highlighting their inherent fundamental aspects: hierophany (whose language is precisely the



symbol), the experience of the sacred, the sacralization of space, time, and human existence.¹

Some critics, especially Anglo-Saxon antropologists, have claimed that his methodology were arbitrary, uncritical, subjective, non-historical, or even anti-historical. Douglas Allen demonstrates that, on the contrary, Eliade makes a major methodological contribution by elaborating a „daring, coherent, creative hermeneutics, providing him with a methodological framework for interpreting the meaning of religious phenomena”.²

His hermeneutical framework is made of 2 large universal systems:

1. The structures of the dialectics of the sacred (and the prophane), in the light of which Eliade distinguishes religious *phenomena*.
2. The structures of religious symbolism, in terms of which he interpretes the *significance* of religious phenomena.

Even **myth**, to which Eliade assigns unique features, structuring and paradigmatic functions, can be interpreted from the perspective of these two systems: myths are religious phenomena, „true” accounts of sacred realities revealed through hierophanies. At the same time, they are made of symbols organized in narratives, since mythical expression is always a language of symbolic associations.³

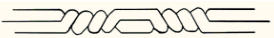
The two macro-systems are integrated in a **hermeneutical** framework, which serves as an interpretative foundation to the **phenomenological** approach. In its turn, the phenomenological level serves as a reference system for mapping religious phenomena from a **historical**, diacronical perspective.

2. Theology of Religions as an academic discipline

¹ Ries, Spineto, *op. cit.*, p. 13-16, 213-228.

² Douglas ALLEN, „Eliade’s Hermeneutics and the Reception of the History of Religion”, în Ries, Spineto, *op. cit.*, p. 245.

³ *Ibidem*, p. 246.



All this is simply neither appropriate, nor sufficient for Orthodox theologians. Eliade was criticized for his Orthodox youth and Legionary sympathies. But I believe, on the contrary, his hermeneutical method is not Orthodox enough. It does not enter into the theological content of the religions described. An interpretive framework from a theological perspective is needed.

I claim it is necessary to add to Eliade's method, in the theological education system, the theological analysis of their meanings, from a Biblical and Patristic perspective. While HPR may be maintained as a foundation, an additional discipline needs to be introduced in the curriculum: the Orthodox Theology of Religions (OTR). On top of HPR, this new discipline should add theological analyses indispensable for a deeper understanding. This paper argues in support for this proposal. Here is an outline of the current status of the discipline called Theology of Religions (TR), often using heterodox approaches.

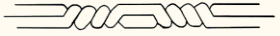
3. Taxonomies of TR

Attempts at logically classifying the various possible ways of approaching this field have resulted in some conceptual matrixes. They are all schematic taxonomies, at global level, covering an enormous diversity of more nuanced positions and presuppositions.

One of them outlines three major schools of thought, dominant models or paradigms⁴: *exclusivism*, *inclusivism* and *pluralism*.⁵

⁴ D'Costa proposes this term in the sense given by Thomas Kuhn in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 1970, cf. Gavin D'Costa, *Theology and Religious Pluralism. The Challenge of Other Religions*, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1986, p. 6.

⁵ Cf. Alan RACE, *Christians and religious pluralism. Patterns in the Christian Theology of Religions*, London, SCM Press, 1983.



A variant of this tripartite classification are Paul Knitter's four models:

1. *Replacement* (total or partial) of other religions with Christianity (another name for the exclusivist model, with a „hard” and a „soft” subdivision);
2. *Fulfilment*, completion or accomplishment of other religions by or through Christianity (a variant of the inclusivist model);
3. *Reciprocity* or „mutual enrichment” of Christianity and other religions (essentially a pluralist model, but keeping an inclusivist component);
4. *Acceptance* of all religions as such, as equally valid ways of salvation (another name for the purely or radically pluralist model).⁶

These models are primarily determined by the answer given to the issue of salvation, and to the two „theological axioms” related to it:

a) **Salvation is possible ONLY through Jesus Christ and His Church** („*extra Ecclesiam nulla salus*”).

Christ says clearly: “I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me”⁷. There are many Biblical passages

⁶ Paul KNITTER, *Introduzione alle teologie delle religioni*, trad. Giorgio Volpe, Queriniana, 315, Brescia 2005 (orig. *Introducing Theologies of Religions*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, N.Y. 2002).

⁷John 14:6. Likewise: „I am the door of the sheep. All that ever came before me are thieves and robbers: but the sheep did not hear them. I am the door: by me if any man enter in, he shall be saved” (John 10:7-9). „For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life. For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved. He that believeth on him is not condemned: but he that believeth not is condemned already, because he hath not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God. And this is the condemnation, that light is come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light,

saying explicitly: “Ye shall not fear other gods, nor bow yourselves to them, nor serve them, nor sacrifice to them” (2 Kings 17:35); „all the gods of the nations [are] idols” (Ps 96:5); „Neither is there salvation in any other [but Jesus Christ]: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved” (Acts 4:12).

b) God’s universal salvific will.

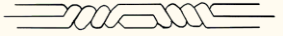
How is the first point reconciled with God’s love of men and His will to „have all men to be saved, and to come unto the knowledge of the truth” (1 Tim 2:4)? Did God’s love pre-ordain a path of salvation so narrow that, objectively, only a small minority can be saved? Has God apriorically condemned the majority of mankind to eternal damnation? Are all pagans who (maybe not necessarily through a fault of their own) have never known Christ, yet lead a “righteous” life, automatically going to Hell? Could salvation still be possible, *in extremis*, also outside of Christianity, yet not *due to* other religions, but *in spite* of belonging to them? To what extent this very question is legitimate, or its very formulation may pertain to heretical syncretism? And if it were legitimate, then how exactly could such salvation be conceivable? Yet, could it be that these very questions may be pointless, or wrongly asked, since God alone has the judgement and He alone decides whom and how He will save?

4. The Exclusivist (Replacement) Model

4.1. Radical Exclusivism (of total replacement): “Only one true religion: Christianity”

The exclusivist perspective is that of Christianity as the sole absolute religion, the only true one, the only one through which salvation is possible. There is no salvation except in and through

because their deeds were evil” (John 3:16-19). „Enter ye in at the strait gate: for wide [is] the gate, and broad [is] the way, that leadeth to destruction, and many there be which go in thereat: Because strait [is] the gate, and narrow [is] the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it. Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves” (Mt 7:13-15).



Jesus Christ alone. There is no salvation in other religions. Non-Christians cannot be saved except by conversion and baptism. Full stop. The doctrines of other religions are erroneous, since they were not revealed. The only revealed teaching is the Christian one. The indispensable condition for salvation is one's own faith and experience of full devotion or personal "commitment" to Christ. Non-Christians are "pagans" who cannot acquire salvation as long as they do not know Christ and do not recognize Him as Lord and God. Other religions are seen as idolatries, their gods or divinities – as demons, their teaching – in total conflict with the Christian one.

Protestant exclusivism emphasizes the Bible as the only source and foundation of knowing all that is necessary for salvation and spiritual life, as sole criterion of full truth. The Bible contains the history of salvation, it is the foundation of faith and guide of the faithful. It comprises the supernatural revelation, the unique objective revelation given to man, in contrast with the "natural" revelation, diversely interpretable, therefore irrelevant for salvation.

Roman-Catholic and Orthodox exclusivism stresses equally, along with the Bible, the Holy Tradition and the Church, the Holy Sacraments, rituals and participation in liturgical life. They are all unreplaceable, and in their absence salvation is unconceivable. "Outside the Church there is no salvation" (*Extra Ecclesiam nulla salus*) is the emblematic axiom for this position, understood literally.

At best, some sapiential teachings and traditions of other religions may contain useful thoughts and advice, which may be recognized as such, and even help Christians see more carefully and appreciate their own Christian teaching. But they have no soteriological value. At the limit, the others are not even religions, in the proper sense in which Christianity is one, but just erroneous delusions or heresies. As such, they are to be replaced

by Christianity. All peoples are to be christianized – and this is how the huge Christian missionary effort has been understood. For centuries, millions of saints, missionaries, and “Apostles of the nations” have covered the continents in an extraordinary Apostolic “crusade” (in the wide sense), meant to illuminate and convert the entire world. All were motivated by the same conviction: that God wills all nations “to be saved and to come to the knowledge of truth”. The final goal is that the whole world should be “one flock with one shepherd” – Jesus Christ. God’s love of men is universal, but exclusively accomplished through communion with Jesus Christ.

Representatives of this position are Hendrik Kraemer,⁸ John Perry, Philippe Glorieux, Ricardo Lombardi⁹, Stephen Neill¹⁰, Leslie Newbigin¹¹, Norman Anderson¹², Henricus van Straelen¹³, Hans Urs von Balthasar¹⁴, Paul Hacker¹⁵, Willem Visser’t Hooft¹⁶. Under Hooft’s presidency this was the official position of the World Council of Churches until 1966. Cardinal Billot, Edinburgh 1910, Ierusalim 1928, Tambaram 1938, Congress on World Mission (Chicago 1960), The Frankfurt Declaration (1970) may also be mentioned.

4.2. Moderate Exclusivism (of partial replacement): „God present in other religions? Salvation no, revelation yes”

Moderate exclusivism asserts that all the other religions can

⁸ *The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World* (1938), *Religion and the Christian Faith* (1956).

⁹ *The Salvation of the Unbeliever*, 1956.

¹⁰ *Christian Faith and Other Faiths*, 1970; *Crises in Belief*, 1984.

¹¹ *The Open Secret*, 1978.

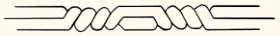
¹² *Christianity and Comparative Religion*, 1971.

¹³ *The Catholic Encounter with World Religions*, 1966.

¹⁴ *The Moment of Christian Witness*, 1969.

¹⁵ *Theological Foundations of Evangelization*, 1980.

¹⁶ *No Other Name: The Choice between Syncretism and Universalism*, 1963.



be regarded at best as preparations for receiving Christianity (*Preparatio Evangelica*). They do contain elements from the divine revelation. However, salvation is not possible through them as doctrine.

Representatives of this position include Jürgen Moltmann¹⁷, as well as the *Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions*, at the Vatican II Council in 1965.

Father Dumitru Stăniloae's position, at least on first sight, might also seem to pertain to the moderate exclusivism typology, for example as expressed in his well-known book published in 1942: *Mister Blaga's position in respect to Christianity and Orthodoxy*.¹⁸ However, on closer scrutiny, Staniloae's position should be more accurately included in what we have called "Empathic Exclusivism". Therefore, Father Staniloae's perspective shall be separately presented below.

5. The Inclusivist Model (of fulfilment) - "Christianity = the fulfilment of all other religions"

The inclusivist model tries, basically, to both eat its cake and have it.

Gavin D'Costa distinguishes between two types of inclusivism: *Restrictive* and *Structural*. In both types, Christ is God's normative revelation, but salvation is also possible outside of the "explicit" Christian Church (i.e. as a visible institution). Christ is exclusively necessary for salvation on the ontological and causal levels, but not necessarily also on the epistemological

¹⁷ Jürgen MOLTSMANN, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit*, 1977.

¹⁸ See Dumitru STĂNILOAE, *Poziția domnului Blaga față de creștinism și ortodoxie*, Tiparul Tipografiei Arhidiecezane, Sibiu, 1942, republ. Paideia, 1997. Also Remus Rus, *Spre o teologie a religiilor în viziunea Părintelui Stăniloae*, at www.crestinortodox.ro/editoriale/spre-teologie-religiilor-viziunea-parintelui-staniloae-70051.html.

level. That means, the believer does not necessarily need to know Christ in a conscious manner, to be aware and consciously acknowledge Christ, in order to be saved: *Solus Christus*, without *fides ex auditu*.

5.1. Restrictive inclusivism

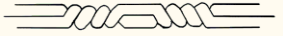
This inclusivism is somewhat more conservative. Christ is the normative revelation of God. Although salvation is possible outside of the explicit Christian Church, this does not legitimize other religions. The other religions are seen as neither actual (effective) salvific structures, nor possible (virtual) ones. This position does see God's inclusiveness as real; however, it restricts its sense to some individual people, adepts of other religions, and even to some elements of their culture, but not to other religions *per se*, through themselves as doctrines.

5.2. Structural inclusivism

The main example here is Karl Rahner's concept of „anonymous Christians”¹⁹. Salvation may be also available through other religions *per se*, is possible outside of the explicit Christian Church, but salvation is always from Christ, who is still the normative revelation of God. This type asserts the pluralist legitimacy of other religions as salvific structures, while also holding to the exclusivist claims of the “causal” saving grace of Christ alone.

Other representatives of the inclusivist / fulfilment model are: John Farquhar (*The Crown of Hinduism*), Wolfhart Pannenberg (*Basic Questions in Theology*, 1971), the much more liberal Eugene Hillman (*The Wider Ecumenism: Anonymous Christianity and the Church*, 1968), Edward Schillebeeckx, Heinz Schlette, Yves Congar, Henri de Lubac. Raimon Panikkar started as an inclusivist

¹⁹ See RAHNER, *Theological Investigations*, 1961-1984.



in his early work (the 1964 first edition of his *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism*), but then firmly moving towards pluralism.

6. The Pluralist Model - "Many true religions, called to dialog and mutual enrichment"

6.1. The Classification of Alan Race: inclusivist pluralism versus pure pluralism

One classification of pluralism is proposed by Alan Race, who distinguishes between **inclusivist pluralism** and **pure pluralism**:

a) Inclusivist Pluralism (of reciprocity): Hans Küng, Jacques Dupuis - „Many true religions, called to dialog and mutual enrichment”. The specific emphasis here is that the various religions are partial truths, therefore they have the duty to learn from one another.

One example is ex-Indian President Radhakrishnan's claim that „differences and divergences among religions are due to the fact that absolute truth is inaccessible to man, divine revelations expressed in words being only partially true. Therefore, no religion should claim absolute truth. However, all religions should all mutually respect and enrich one another”.²⁰

Another example is Hans Küng (*On Being a Christian*, 1976), holding a liberal-inclusivist, but tending to a pluralist position.

Jacques Dupuis, a Neo-Rahnerian, has an inclusivist pluralist position, in a wide sense. He believes that the other religions are not just mere preparative steps for Christianity, but

²⁰ C. B. PAPALI, *L'induismo oggi*, în *Le Missioni e le religioni non cristiane*, Milano, 1964, p. 35-38, *apud* Mihai HIMCINSCHI, “Orthodox Insights for a Contemporary Interreligious Dialogue”, in *International Journal of Orthodox Theology* 4:1 (2013), p. 83-111.



are capable of making” added, autonomous benefits”.²¹

Other representatives of inclusivist pluralism (some of them also holding to left-wing, Marxian political views), tending in various degrees toward pure pluralism, are:

– Jules Monchanin, Henri le Saux (Swami Abhishiktananda): *Saccidananda. An Indian Benedictine Ashram*, 1951.

– Stanley Samartha: *Faith in the midst of Faiths. Reflections on Dialogue in Community*, World Council of Churches, Geneva, 1977; *Living Faiths and Ultimate Goals*, 1974 (includes Marxism as a living faith!); *Towards a World Community: Resources and Responsibilities for Living Together*, 1975. With the World Council of Churches: *The Cross and the Rainbow: Christ in a Multireligious Culture*.

– John Robinson, *Truth is Two-Eyed*, 1979.

– Paul Tillich, *Christianity and the Encounter of the World Religions*, 1963.

– Klaus Klostermaier, *Hindu and Christian in Vrindaban*, 1969; *Kristvidya*, 1967.

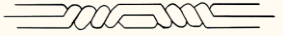
– Bede Griffiths, *Return to the Centre*, 1978; *The Marriage of East and West*, 1982.

– John Cobb, *Beyond Dialogue: Towards a Mutual Transformation of Christianity and Buddhism*, 1982

– Pierre Johans, George Dandoy, *The Light of the East*, journal, 1922-1934.

b) Pure pluralism (of total acceptance) - „Many true religions: and that’s it!”. This is an extreme liberal perspective. All religions are equally valid ways to salvation. All sacred writings of all religions are divine revelations. Krishna, Buddha, Mohamed, Zarathustra, Laozi and all the other great figures of the world religions are equal intermediaries for salvation, all share the

²¹ Cf. Jacques DUPUIS, *Verso una teologia cristiana del pluralismo religioso*, Queriniana, Brescia 1997, p. 521, *apud* Johannes HESSEN, *Il cristianesimo e davvero la religione assoluta? Una ricerca di filosofia della religione*, ed. a cura di Andrea Aguti, prefata, p. 22, n. 31. (English transl. *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism*, 2002).



same (human) status, all have the same salvific value and power as Jesus Christ. Representatives include John Hick, Paul Knitter, Raimon Panikkar (later work), who shall be discussed below.

6.2. *The Classification of Gavin D'Costa*

Another classification of pluralism is proposed by Gavin D'Costa: **unitary, pluriform, ethical.**

a) Unitary Pluralism: John Hick, Alan Race, Roger Haight, Perry Schmidt-Leukel. The emblematic figure here is John Hick.²² A God Who loves and desires to save all people couldn't have condemned to eternal damnation millions of "inculpably ignorant". Hick wants to replace Ecclesio-centrism and Christo-centrism with Theo-centrism, where God is understood theistically. God's Incarnation is to be understood "mythically", not ontologically. Therefore, Hick's initial pluralism is unitary theism, not trinitarian or Christocentric. Later, answering criticism that his theocentrism is a theistic essentialism which excludes non-theistic religions, Hick tried to go beyond theism (God, Yahveh, Allah) and non-theism (Nirvana, Nirguna Brahman, Dao, Tian), basing his unitary pluralism on a noumenal Real of Kantian extraction. This divine noumenal reality, "existing independently and outside man's perception of it", he calls the "Eternal One".

Clearly, Hick's theism and mythological interpretation of the Incarnation are heretical, as they utterly contradict basic Christian Orthodox dogmas.

Moreover, D'Costa claims that Hick's unitary pluralism is a new form of triumphalism and imperialism, of an agnostic type. Like Kant, Hick can only give ethical criteria for the truthfulness of a religion, but no doctrinal criteria. Religion eventually becomes a matter of ethics. Agnosticism – says D'Costa – "is the

²² *God and the Universe of Faiths* (1973), *God has Many Names* (1980), *Death and Eternal Life* (1976).

inevitable outcome of the trajectory of Hick's flight from particularity: first, from the particularity of the incarnation; then from the particularity of a theistic God; and then from the particularity of any religious claim, be it Christian or non-Christian. The outcome of his escape from particularity leads to nothing in particular".

Imposing a Kantian "Real" upon all religions is both "imperialist" and illegitimate. D'Costa's conclusion is devastating:

"Hick is left with a 'pick and mix' divine Reality, with no authoritative revelation. One can simply choose which parts of which tradition one likes. Hick ends up with authoritative ethics and principles – and, like Kant, with no adequate metaphysical grounding for either. Finally, in the process of deprivileging all revelations, Hick ends up mythologizing both theistic and non-theistic claims. Ironically, in his attempt to accommodate the world religions on an equal status within his pluralist outlook, he ends up accommodating none of them, as he can only accept them within his system, on his terms, rather than theirs."

Other theistic unitary pluralists are Alan Race (Anglican)²³, Wilfred Cantwell Smith (Protestant)²⁴, Roger Haight (Jesuit)²⁵, Perry Schmidt-Leukel (Anglican, ex-Catholic)²⁶.

b) Pluriform Pluralism. Here a main example is Raimundo Panikkar's later work²⁷: He uses three rivers (Jordan,

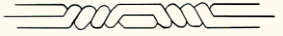
²³ Alan RACE, *Christians and Religious Pluralism*, 1983.

²⁴ W.C. SMITH, *The Meaning and End of Religion*, 1963; *Towards a World Theology*, 1980.

²⁵ R. HAIGHT, *Jesus, Symbol of God*, Orbis, Maryknoll, 1999.

²⁶ Perry SCHMIDT-LEUKEL, *God Without Limits: A Christian and Pluralistic Theology of Religions*, London, SCM, 2008.

²⁷ Raimundo PANIKKAR, *The Jordan, the Tiber, and the Ganges*, in: John Hick & Paul Knitter (eds.), *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness: Towards a Pluralistic Theology of Religions*, Orbis, Maryknoll, 1987, p. 98–116.



Tiber, Ganges) to symbolize the shift in Christianity's view of other religions. The Jordan represents Christianity in its earliest days, fighting for survival, with a traditional exclusivist view. The Tiber stands for Christianity's imperial expansion to an inclusivist outlook. The Ganges, today, requires a new baptism in Asian waters, a crossing over into pluralism.

Panikkar, a Catholic priest, claims to be a Christian-Hindu-Buddhist. For him, a *cosmotheandric* reality underlies all things, in which the divine, the human, and the earthly are held together indivisibly, yet distinctly. The Trinity is the Christian way of framing this reality, but the Trinity is not exclusive to Christian revelation.

Though for Panikkar, Jesus *is* the Logos incarnate, he rejects that the Logos is restricted to Jesus Christ, for this makes the Incarnation subject to "Christo-idolatry" (the danger of exclusivism). He also rejects that all salvation comes from the historical Jesus Christ, such that other religions cannot be "savioric".

He sees the Trinity as a "trans-Christian mode of divine action". He wishes to balance the exclusive emphasis on the Son alone (currently a problem in the TR debate) with his "cosmotheandric" reality.

For him, the Father is the divine utterly other, beyond all forms. Nothing can be said of "it", apophatic silence is the purest way of responding to the unfathomable mystery or "nothingness" of the divine. This corresponds to the paths of mysticism and asceticism, leading to self-surrender, self-forgetfulness, compassion, love, service. But this mystical path also entails, for Panikkar, a danger of indifference to the world. He sees strands of apophatic mysticism within Christianity, Theravada Buddhism and Advaita Hinduism. Compared to the utter mystery of the Father, the Son is an icon, standing for the path of personal devotion, ecstasy of love, joy, mercy, forgiveness, reconciliation,

humanity. Panikkar reads the self-emptying (*kenosis*) of Christ in terms of Buddhist *sunyata* and *nirvana*. He also sees theistic Hinduism in this spirituality. The danger of the Son's path is anthropocentrism, making the human the measure of all things or, in its divine form, assuming God to be a "Person". Of course, this theistic view is heretical from a trinitarian perspective, since the three Persons of the Trinity *are* indeed real, not illusory, Persons.

The Spirit is the mediator, only seen in its effects. This path is associated with power and charisma; Panikkar relates it to Tantric Buddhism and Shivaite-Shakti tradition in Hinduism that map the deep powers within the human in which the divine resides, the *kundalini*.

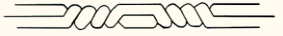
Panikkar heretically cuts the inextricable relationship between the eternal, transcendental Logos, and the incarnate Logos in Jesus Christ. Thus, he wrongly argues, the risen Christ is not necessarily present wherever the Logos acts. This view subordinates the "historical Jesus" to the "Christ principle".

Panikkar moved from exclusivism to pluralism. In the 1964 edition of *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism*, Panikkar could still write that the Logos is revealed in Jesus Christ, and Christianity is "where Christ is fully revealed, the end and plenitude of every religion"²⁸. But in the 1981 edition he changed: "When I call this link between the finite and the infinite by the name of Christ, I am not presupposing its identification with Jesus of Nazareth"²⁹. Thus Panikkar abandons his early Christo-centricism.

Panikkar subordinates the historical revelation of the Trinity to the cosmotheandric principle. He unambiguously says that the Trinity is not a unique truth of the self-revelation of the

²⁸ R. PANIKKAR, *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism*, Darton, Longman & Todd, London, 1964, p. 24; *The Trinity and the Religious Experience of Man*, 1973.

²⁹ R. PANIKKAR, *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism*, 1981, p. 27.



triune God, but an insight into a reality that is also equally, but differently, reflected in Eastern religions. His meaning is not that Eastern religions bear vestiges of the Trinity, which could be true. The implicit meaning is that, were the Trinity not known in Christianity, it would be known in these religions.³⁰

Another problem is posed by Panikkar's claim that Christianity and other religions are "viewed from a place outside of any particular tradition, through the forging of a kind of religious Esperanto named Christian-Hindu-Buddhist". Panikkar is not the only Christian to claim such multiple belonging, the problem being more complex. But from the viewpoint of Orthodoxy, Panikkar's position presents serious Christological and trinitarian difficulties.

Other pluriform pluralists are S. Mark Heim (Baptist)³¹, John B. Cobb (Methodist³²), David Ray Griffin³³ (process theologians).

c) Ethical Pluralism

A key figure here is Paul Knitter³⁴, who moved from an initial exclusivist position to a Rahnerian-inclusivist one, then to a Hickian-theocentric, then a liberationist-ethical pluralist one. Knitter brings the political and ethical dimensions of TR to the

³⁰ D'Costa, *ibid.*, 15.

³¹ Mark Heim, *The Depth of the Riches: A Trinitarian Theology of Religious Ends*, W. B. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 2001.

³² John B. COBB, *Beyond Dialogue: Towards a Mutual Transformation of Christianity and Buddhism*. Fortress Press, Philadelphia, 1982.

³³ David Ray GRIFFIN (ed.), *Deep Religious Pluralism*. John Knox, Westminster, 2005.

³⁴ See Paul KNITTER, *No Other Name? A Critical Survey of Christian Attitudes Toward the World Religions*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York, 1985. *Idem*, „Christianity and the World Religions: A New Era of Encounter and Growth”, in Bernd JASPERS & Rudolf MOHR (ed.), *Traditio – Krisis – Renovatio aus theologischer Sicht* (Festschrift Winfried Zeller zum 65 Geburtstag), Elwert Verlag Marburg, 1976, p. 501-512.

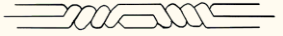
fore. He too tries to overcome the so-called "imperialism" of the God-Christ-Church approach. He proposes a different approach, criticizing Hick's emphasis on reality-centric, "common essence" to all religions, which would imperialistically impose a commonality, a oneness, on all religions, despite the real differences among them.³⁵ Instead, Knitter argues that all religions are to be judged by their truthfulness and responsiveness to what Christians call "God", insofar as religions promote the "kingdom" through social struggle for "justice", "peace", "tolerance", "equality."

Since the kingdom is characterized by the fruits of the Spirit (for Christians), Knitter's emphasis on the "kingdom" entails an emphasis on the Spirit, instead of Christ. Thus other religions are endorsed as God-given and inspired, without needing an "anonymous" Christ.³⁶ Christ is bypassed by this pneumatological emphasis, in order to avoid the Christological focus due to which Christians could not grant equal status to other religions. Knitter takes the ethical emphasis in Hick as his foundational starting point, but gives it a Spirit/kingdom basis. Knitter calls his position *soteriocentricism*, seeing it as a move beyond Christocentricism, ecclesiocentricism, theocentricism, Hick's realo-centricism, Panikkar's cosmo-theandricism. While recognizing that the terms "kingdom" and "Spirit" are derived from his own Christian tradition, Knitter claims that the reality denoted by the kingdom – the struggle for justice and peace – is not an exclusive Christian possession or derived only from Christ or God³⁷. For example, when

³⁵ KNITTER *et al.*, 1990, 47–8.

³⁶ A similar view is found in Roger Haight, *Jesus, Symbol of God*, Orbis, Maryknoll, 1999, and the Orthodox George Khodr, "An Orthodox perspective on interreligious dialogue", *Current Dialogue*, 19, 1, 1991, 25–7.

³⁷ Paul KNITTER, John COBB Jr, Len SWIDLER, Monica HELLWIG, *Death or Dialogue?* Orbis, Maryknoll, 1990, 33–48.



religions promote the oppression of women, they are to be judged as being against the kingdom. When they tackle the marginalization and exploitation of the poor and the weak, they promote the kingdom. For Knitter no religion is to be assessed except by these social-ethical criteria.

6.3. The critique of the pluralist model as a relativizing meta-perspective

Unfortunately, Knitter's soterio-centricism runs into serious problems. He cannot escape the question of normativity, of the doctrinal framework of meaning that informs the notion of salvation ("*soteria*"), and the ontological grounding of ethics. Knitter is aware of this, but finds "imperialism" on behalf of the poor and marginalized more acceptable than "imperialism" that acts on behalf of correct doctrine. This position is not tenable, for reasons which D'Costa formulates as follows³⁸:

Firstly, because Knitter is striving for a common place where differences of doctrine are bypassed, he fails to account for the way in which the paradigmatic and normative sources of a tradition shape the understanding of what "the human condition" is and what it ought to be, and what constitutes "liberative" actions. Hence, "promoting human welfare" is an unhelpful common denominator, as it specifies nothing in particular until each tradition defines the terms. For one tradition it can mean proper adherence to *jati* (caste), for another it means obeying the most authoritative interpretation of *sharia* (Muslim law), for another it means adhering to noncontraceptive forms of sexuality, and for another it may mean opposing all of the above as contrary to liberative justice. In this sense there is no way in which theory can bypass praxis

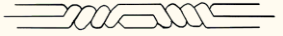
³⁸ Gavin D'COSTA, *Christianity and World Religions*, *op. cit.*, p. 25.

or vice versa. They are always in mutual interaction. And if theory cannot be bypassed, Knitter has not escaped the theoretical problems he found so intractable.

Secondly, Knitter's emphasis on ethics is reminiscent of the Kantian ethical golden rule employed by Hick: as we cannot agree on religious truths, let us agree on moral truths. The assumption here is that universal moral truths are easy to establish and religious truths deeply contested. However, this relies on two presuppositions.

The first assumption is that there is such a thing as praxis without theory, or a priority given to practice that is able to establish justice. The second is that Knitter's view presupposes that ethics is about acting on apparently self-evident right causes: equality, justice, liberty, etc. This ethical stance is called into question from an Aristotelian virtue-ethics approach in which the relationship of action, theory, and goods is very differently construed. In the Aristotelian view, the *telos* of action is understood in terms of the goods that are internal to particular types of activity, not in terms of their outcome, which leads to consequentialism and pragmatism. Ethics is thus part of a cosmological narrative, inseparable from ontology and complex questions regarding the "good." There is, in effect, no such thing as "action" without "belief," a narrative form that makes it a "good" action.

Thirdly, Knitter's attempt to bypass Christ through an emphasis on the Spirit and the "kingdom" instead is problematic. First, it introduces a rupture within the Trinity which does not exist in the Patristic tradition: that somehow the Spirit is ontologically independent of the Son, and the Son's actions are somehow independent of the Spirit's activity. There is a danger of tritheism here. Second, it introduces separability between the kingdom of God and the person of Jesus, thus rendering the kingdom into an ideological programme or a



product of human action alone. This is unbiblical and possibly Pelagian in emphasizing salvation by good works. Third, the criterion for discerning the authentic activity of the Spirit is Christological, such that it becomes impossible to identify either of the two persons without the other being co-present. Fourth, it is not clear why an “anonymous Christ” is imperialist and an “anonymous Spirit” is not.³⁹

Asian theologians such as Aloysius Pieris⁴⁰, Felix Wilfred⁴¹, Michael Amaladoss, Samuel Rayan, who emphasize the imperialist and colonial patterns of exclusivism and inclusivism, have liberationist positions similar to Knitter’s.

Other representatives are: Ernst Troeltsch⁴², William Hocking⁴³, Arnold Toynbee⁴⁴, Mariasusai Dhavamony⁴⁵, Gregory Baum⁴⁶, Kevin Vanhoozer⁴⁷, Peter Phan⁴⁸, Harvey Cox⁴⁹,

³⁹ See Gavin D’COSTA, *The Meeting of Religions and the Trinity*. T. & T. Clark, Edinburgh, 2000, 30–40.

⁴⁰ See Aloysius PIERIS, *An Asian Theology of Liberation*, Orbis, Maryknoll, 1988.

⁴¹ See Felix WILFRED, *Sunset in the East: Asian Challenges and Christian Involvement*. University of Madras Press, Madras, 1991.

⁴² Ernst TROELTSCH, „The Place of Christianity among the World Religions”.

⁴³ William Hocking, *Rethinking Missions*, 1932 (poziția de „apreciere reciprocă”).

⁴⁴ Arnold TOYNBEE, *Christianity and Religious Pluralism*, 1983.

⁴⁵ Mariasusai DHAVAMONY (dir.), *Theology of Religions. Christianity and Other Religions*, Studia Missionalia, vol. 42, Editrice Pontificia Università Gregoriana, Roma, 1993.

⁴⁶ Gregory BAUM, „Christianity and other religions: a Catholic problem”, *Cross Currents* 16, 1966.

⁴⁷ Kevin VANHOOSER (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodern Theology*, Cambridge University Press, 2003, și *Remythologizing Theology. Divine Action, Passion, and Authorship*, Cambridge University Press, 2010.

⁴⁸ Peter PHAN & Jonathan RAY (eds.), *Special issue on understanding religious pluralism: perspectives from religious studies and theology*, Journal of

Rosemary Ruether⁵⁰, Sister Vandana⁵¹.

7. The paradigm of “Compared Theology”⁵²

The adepts of this new approach claim that we should stop trying to create general frameworks *about* religions. Instead, we should concretely engage each religion, analyzing it in its specificity. The purpose is not to judge it, but to see what Christianity can learn from a detailed study of the sacred writings and practices of each religious tradition. We need not a theology *of* religions, but multiple theologies *in* specific interaction *with* religions.

In line with Compared Theology is the *Scriptural Reasoning* movement, but having a different, pragmatist orientation.

The main representatives of the compared theology paradigm are: Principalii reprezentanți ai curentului teologiei comparate sunt: Francis Clooney⁵³, Jim Fredericks⁵⁴, John

Ecumenical Studies, vol. 48, no. 3, summer 2013, Temple University, Philadelphia.

⁴⁹ Harvey COX, *The secular city*, Pelican, 1965, and *Turning East. The Promise and peril of the New Orientalism*, Penguin, 1977.

⁵⁰ Rosemary RUETHER, „An invitation to Jewish-Christian dialogue. In what sense can we say that Jesus was the «Christ»?”, in *The Ecumenist*, 10, 1972, p. 17-24.

⁵¹ Sister Vandana, *Social Justice and Ashrams*, 1982.

⁵² This paradigm is particularly appreciated by Gavin D’Costa. We are gratefully acknowledging our debt to professor Stoyan Tanev, who has drawn our attention to the potential particular value of this model for an Orthodox theology of religions.

⁵³ See F. CLOONEY, „The Emerging Field of Comparative Theology”, in *Theological Studies*, 56 (1995); *Idem*, *Hindu God*, Oxford, 2001.

⁵⁴ Zezi J. FREDERICKS, *Buddhists and Christians* (Maryknoll, New York: 2004); *Idem*, *Faith among Faiths* (Maryknoll, New York: 2004); *Idem*, „A



Berthrong, Robert Cummings Neville⁵⁵, David Burrell, Leo Lefubre, Pim Valkenberg, Michael Barnes⁵⁶, John Keenan, Sebastian Painadath, Francis Veneeth, Joseph Pathrapankal, Klaus von Stosch⁵⁷.

8. Towards an Orthodox Theology of Religions (OTR)

8.1. *The object of OTR*

In this section I shall outline some elements which would be specific to an Orthodox Theology of Religions.

The object of the **Orthodox Theology of Religions** (OTR) is the systematic theological study, on Biblical and Patristic bases, of the other "religions" (a problematic term, as we shall see) or religious traditions, trying to answer questions concerning the way they regard (or not) the Godhead, the works of God in the world, Christology, soteriology, ecclesiology, missiology, eschatology, pneumatology, and other specific aspects of Orthodox dogmatics.

In my view, OTR should follow in its approach two fundamental principles:

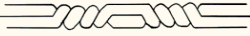
1) Orthodoxy is not simply one religion among others, but **the repository of the entire truth**. Therefore, OTR must preserve total fidelity to the Biblical and Patristic teaching and the tradition of the Orthodox Church. In other words, it should avoid any compromise, be it dogmatic, doctrinal, liturgic or

universal religious experience? Comparative theology as an alternative to a theology of religions", *Horizons* 22, 1995, p. 67-87.

⁵⁵ R. NEVILLE, *Behind the Masks of God*, New York, Albany, 1991.

⁵⁶ Michael BARNES, *Theology and the Dialogue of Religions*, Cambridge University Press, 2004.

⁵⁷ Klaus von STOSCH, *Comparative theology as Challenge for the Theology of the 21st Century*, Religious Inquiries, 2, Paderborn, 2016. We owe prof. Stoyan Tanev the signaling of this author.



moral. I would call it the *Orthodoxy* Principle.

2) The theological reflection should never force conceptually the overlap of specifically Christian notions over those of other traditions. It should penetrate as deeply as possible into the ways of thinking of the respective cultures, grasping with attention and discernment, in their own terms, and respecting their specificity. I would call it the *Empathy* Principle.

The two principles are, at first sight, hard to reconcile. They seem contrary to each other, even mutually exclusive. But Christians are used to paradox and oximoronic thinking, permanently operating with antinomic realities: the Godhead Who is One in His Being, yet Trinitarian in Persons; the double nature of Jesus Christ; the eternal virginity of the Theotokos, etc. Therefore, simultaneous acceptance of seemingly irreconcilable principles should not be too difficult.

8.2. Wider Ecumenism versus an empathic Exclusivist OTR

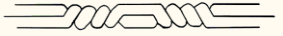
It must be stated clearly that Orthodox faith is incompatible with pluralist and inclusivist models, which are meta-perspectives with a relativising purport.

Orthodoxy is definitely **contrary** to an understanding of the Theology of Religions as a way to what is called "*Wider Ecumenism*".⁵⁸

Theology of Religions is **not** meant to open a path toward a forced unification of all religions within a globalizing conglomerate of a syncretistic type.

Nor can it serve as a pretext for forging a unique world religion, without Christ, or with a "Christ" understood in a falsified way.

⁵⁸ See Michael BARNES, *Theology and the Dialogue of Religions*, Cambridge University Press, 2004, p. 3.



Its aim is not to “prepare the way for the **pan-religion** of the ‘New Age’, in denial of the uniqueness of salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ”⁵⁹.

It cannot promote the “Branch Theory” within Christianity, nor extrapolate this theory to all other religions which were mere “branches” of one single pan-religion.

On the contrary, the goal of OTR is to promote the opposite teaching, by emphasizing the empathic **exclusivist** model.

OTR is to facilitate a proper understanding of other religions from an Orthodox perspective, in close connection with the missionary dimension.

Therefore, an Orthodox Theology of Religions can only be of an **exclusivist** type: Christianity is uniquely based on the divine revelation through the Incarnation. God is exclusively revealed in Jesus Christ. Salvation is only in Christ, like in the exclusivist model (*solus Christus*). Salvation through Christ is solely via his Church (*solus Ecclesia*), i.e. *extra Ecclesiam nulla salus*.

8.3. Universal Access Exclusivism. The question of posthumous salvation and Christ’s Descent to Hell

However, the restrictive access model of exclusivism is too narrow, since a predestined election by God for salvation or damnation would limit human freedom of choice. We cannot say either that all non-Christians are predestined for damnation. Such a verdict would set limits to God’s salvific will and his absolute freedom to save whoever and however He chooses.

Therefore, *universal accessis* the model which would fit the Orthodox position. Moreover, it would be the **posthumous** one, based on the possibility that Christ can also be witnessed at the time of death or after death.

⁵⁹ Seraphim COLLINS, “Revolution through Ambiguity”, paper presented at SOPHIE 2016, from the author’s personal archive.

Some Orthodox elders say that, at the time of death, God Himself may give, to those He deems worthy and wants to save, according to criteria known to Him only, a mysterious conversion, a kind of inner revelation or wonderful vision of the Godhead. Thus He may introduce them, in a way beyond our comprehension, into His Church.⁶⁰ This is also related to the enigmatic statement: „In My Father’s house there are many mansions”⁶¹.

The possibility of post-mortem salvation is argued by D’Costa by Christ’s descent to hell after His death on the cross. The icon depicting Christ pulling Adam and Eve out of hell is the canonical Orthodox icon of the Resurrection. But can this be applied to the posthumous salvation of the “just” pagans? St Clement of Alexandria (Stromata 6.6) is quoted suggesting that the Apostles, imitating Christ, also preached in Hades. Clement quoted the *Shepherd of Hermas* to this extent: ”the apostles and the teachers who preached the name of the Son of God, after they had fallen asleep in the power and faith of the Son of God, preached also... to them that had fallen asleep before them, and themselves gave unto them the seal of the preaching. Therefore they went down with them into the water, and came up again... So by their means they were quickened into life, and came to the full knowledge of the name of the Son of God.” (IX, 16:5–7)

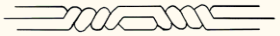
I leave this here, as an in-depth analysis of this topos is beyond the scope of this paper.

8.4. The “Empathic Exclusivism” Model. The missionary scope of OTR

Other religions have no salvific value *per se*, as doctrines.

⁶⁰ This claim is made by Father Adrian Fageteanu (interview filmed in Nov. 2007, in this author’s personal archive, transcribed in the volume *Părintele Adrian Făgețeanu: Viața mea, mărturia mea*, Areopag, Bucuresti, 2011).

⁶¹ John 14:2.



They are not ways of salvation, as their doctrines contain numerous false, heterodox or heretical teachings. In fact, the very term "religions" is problematic. Properly speaking we cannot call the others "religions", because that name implies they are on the same level of legitimacy with Christianity, which they are not. For example, Islam and Judaism were considered heresies, until the 18th century and even later, in respect to Christianity. Judaism was seen as a wrong turn of Mozaism after the revelation in Christ: instead of recognizing the fulfilment of Mozaism in the coming of the prophetized Messiah, Judaism had developed a path astray from this recognition, God's revelation gone awry or turned amiss by his chosen people. Islam was seen as a misled sect developed from a Judeo-Christian heritage by twisting its essential teachings. Buddhism was seen as a "Godless religion", a contradiction in terms. OTR cannot claim these assessments were entirely incorrect. Psalm 95:5 says clearly: "All the gods of nations are demons". But then, how could we call them? Unfortunately, does anyone seriously think it would be possible to introduce a discipline called "Theology of heresies or idolatries"? We have to admit "religions" as a desperate choice, of last resort, and to accept this term, for lack of a better one, as a realistic solution in the current academic context.

However, the attitude of the Orthodox toward the pagan believers is to be one of **empathy**. OTR should try to identify, understand, and theologically interpret, in the light of Biblical and Patristic tradition, whatever "seeds of the Logos" (St Justin the Martyr) their religious traditions may have preserved from the original Adamic monotheism.

The goal of such an approach is to facilitate Orthodox mission, aimed at helping to "graft" Christianity onto those traditions, and to bridge the cultural gap for pagans who wish to become Orthodox. Orthodox missionary work is not to be abandoned, like it has been abandoned by the post-Vatican II

Catholic Church, in the name of a positively valued ‘difference’ which should not be an obstacle in the way of ‘unity’. Orthodox mission should be passionately promoted, and TR should be one instrument facilitating it.

This is a major challenge to Orthodox theology today.

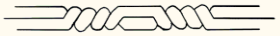
Father Staniloae and other authors have highlighted Romania’s special position as a border, buffer, or interface region, which has often acted as a buffer between civilisations. Geographically and culturally Romania straddles a civilisational watershed between East and West – the Carpathian Mountains⁶². We can also consider the heritage of Mircea Eliade, as an outstanding historian of religions enjoying world recognition.

Given this position, Romanian Orthodoxy could be well placed for rising to that challenge.

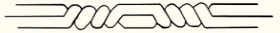
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⁶² See Samuel Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations*, Simon and Schuster, 1995.



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