

**NEITHER NAÏVE NOR NARROW: A BALANCED PENTECOSTAL  
APPROACH TO CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY OF RELIGIONS**

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**Introduction**

Pentecostals are not necessarily known for balance. We tend to be all or nothing kind of folks. How often I have heard Pentecostal preachers stirring challenge listeners to be either hot or cold, warning the weary of the dire dangers of spiritual tepidity (cf. Rev 3:15-16)! And sometimes this may be precisely the best position. We do not usually admire one who cannot or will not completely commit to anything or anyone. Yet in an earlier effort I note my opinion that a “balanced approach to the religions will be neither naïve nor narrow.”<sup>1</sup> Here an implication that balance is important in theology of religions is linked with a suggestion as to its possible nature.

The phrase “neither naïve nor narrow” sets some parameters for Pentecostal balance on theology of religions. For me the word “naïve” suggests a sentimental stickiness that does not deal with the real, radical differences among the world’s religions. Accordingly it ignores the issues and hopes no one will notice. Often it compromises its own heritage for the sake of compliance. Much so-called religious

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<sup>1</sup> Tony Richie, “John Wesley and Mohammed: A Contemporary Inquiry Concerning Islam”, *Asbury Theological Journal* (Fall 2003), pp. 79-99 (p. 91).

pluralism sallies forth under this garbled guise.<sup>2</sup> For me the word “narrow” suggests a self-centered psychosis that alienates itself from any realities of divine presence beyond its own borders. Often it ostracizes itself even as it demonizes others. Much so-called religious Fundamentalism sallies forth under this garbled guise. Can Pentecostalism avoid both extremes? I think so. Pentecostalism can and should draw on balance and poise inherent in its own identity.<sup>3</sup> A valid, vibrant Pentecostal theology of religions that does not compromise biblical, historic Christianity or act condescendingly or contemptuously toward other world religions is both possible and desirable for Pentecostals and for our friends in the interfaith venture.<sup>4</sup>

### **Some Broad Principles for a Balanced Pentecostal Theology of Religions**

A few representative general guidelines will perhaps suffice to show some of the developments in Pentecostal theology of religions.<sup>5</sup>

#### *Biblical, Theological, Historical, Practical*

Pentecostalism is noted for combining nuances of primitivism and pragmatism.<sup>6</sup> Pentecostal theology of religions almost necessarily incorporates this combination. John Wesley, an important proto-Pentecostal, exhibited openness to God’s compassionate

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<sup>2</sup> Though problematic at points, still the most popular typology toward religions is pluralism, exclusivism, and inclusivism. “Inclusivism” describes a christocentric and pneumatic openness regarding the present state and eternal fate of the unevangelized or adherents of other religions; exclusivism” a closed attitude, positing that a conscious personal response to the preached gospel is absolutely necessary; and, “pluralism” equating all religions while denying superiority to any. A great deal of ambiguity exists among these broad categories.

<sup>3</sup> See Tony Richie, “‘The Unity of the Spirit’: Are Pentecostals Inherently Ecumenicists and Inclusivists?”, presented during the 34<sup>th</sup> Annual Meeting of the Society for Pentecostal Studies (Regent University, Virginia Beach, VA, March 10-12, 2005).

<sup>4</sup> I assume that most readers of this paper are probably not Pentecostal but may be open to possibilities of partnership.

<sup>5</sup> Pentecostals are presently engaging in internal dialogue regarding interfaith understanding, religious pluralism, and theology of religions. E.g., Frank D. Macchia, Ralph Del Colle, Dale T. Irvin, and Amos Yong in “Christ and Spirit: Dogma, Discernment and Dialogical Theology in a Religiously Plural World,” *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 12:1 (2003): 15-83.

<sup>6</sup> Grant Wacker, *Heaven Below: Early Pentecostals and American Culture* (London, Eng: Harvard University Press, 2001).

concern for non-Christian peoples. Wesley's work on the religions offers a pool of wisdom from which Pentecostal heirs can draw biblical, theological, historical, practical guidance. In other words, Pentecostal primitivism and pragmatism can be expressed in a theology of religions articulated along Wesleyan lines.

Wesley built an optimistic attitude toward adherents of other religions on a scriptural foundation, on the Church Fathers, and on an evangelical form of Arminianism.<sup>7</sup> A number of relevant applications for a Wesleyan-Pentecostal theology of religions may be summarily suggested. First, Pentecostal theology of religions should be able to straightforwardly address differences with non-Christian religions while simultaneously acknowledging existing truth or piety in them as well. Second, proponents should make honest, energetic efforts to really understand other religions, so much as is possible for non-participants, if we are to relate well with them. Third, Pentecostals should be honest and humble in dealings with other religions; we have all made mistakes and sinned against spiritual others. Repentance and reconciliation are in order. Fourth, Pentecostals should not surrender to reactionary theology governed by inflammatory attitudes of religious-political contexts but rather take the time to work out a real theology of religions with depth and breadth. Fifth, Pentecostal theology of religions should affirm the significance of providence in the existence of religions; God really is over all and in all working for all. Sixth, Pentecostals ought to understand that salvation is much richer and fuller than we might have ever imagined, and that it encompasses others in ways we had not previously supposed. Grace is not confined. Seventh, and ever so significantly, we should witness more with authentic deeds of holy

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. Richie, "John Wesley and Mohammed", pp. 86-90. Much in this article is applicable for relations with world religions other than Islam as well.

love than with words of dialogue or diatribe. Additionally, Wesleyan-Pentecostal openness and tolerance does not diminish commitment to the ultimate character of the Lord Jesus Christ. We simply depend on God to judge and reward all properly. Christians being authentically Christian is probably the real, first priority in all relations with other religions.<sup>8</sup>

*Experiential, Pneumatological*

Individual religious experience is an all-important value for Pentecostals; indeed, “Pentecostals consider personal experience the arena of true religion.”<sup>9</sup> Jackie Johns says, “At the core of the Pentecostal worldview is affective experience of God”.<sup>10</sup> Pentecostals and Charismatics lead the way in reminding the Church that “it is not theology that is primary but rather a revitalization of the experience of the Spirit.”<sup>11</sup> I have noticed that the seed of all real religious experience, or the numinous, as described by Rudolf Otto and defended by Carl G. Jung and C. S. Lewis is particularly compatible with Pentecostal theology and spirituality.<sup>12</sup> Additionally, Harvey Cox posits a “primal spirituality” at the base of Pentecostal identity that has perhaps helped develop flexibility in the context of non-Christian cultures contributing to its amazing missiological success.<sup>13</sup> Such understandings of religious experience allow and invite possibilities of an underlying,

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid: pp. 91-93. A more thorough analysis of Wesley’s theology of religions takes into account emphases on prevenient grace (divine grace operative prior to Christian conversion) and the *Imago Dei*, and their relationship to anthropology, pneumatology, and soteriology—which eventuate in optimism.

<sup>9</sup> R. P. Spittler, “Spirituality, Pentecostal and Charismatic”, *The New International Dictionary of Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements (NIDPCM)* (eds. Stanley M. Burgess, Eduard M. Van Der Maas; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), pp. 1096-1102 (1097).

<sup>10</sup> Jackie David Johns, “Pentecostalism and the Postmodern Worldview”, *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 7 (1995), pp. 73-96 (p. 87).

<sup>11</sup> Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *Pneumatology: The Holy Spirit in Ecumenical, International, and Contextual Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), pp. 13-16 (15).

<sup>12</sup> Tony Richie, “Awe-Full Encounters: A Pentecostal Conversation with C. S. Lewis Concerning Spiritual Experience”, *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 14:1(2005), pp. 99-122.

<sup>13</sup> Harvey Cox, *Fire From Heaven: The Rise of Pentecostal Spirituality and the Reshaping of Religion in the Twenty-First Century* (NY: Addison-Wesley, 1995), pp. 101-102.

universal experiential encounter with the Divine Spirit among non-Christians. While most Pentecostals doubtless never dream of disjoining experiencing the Spirit from Christian understanding, perhaps not equally untrue is that we conceive the workings of the Spirit as being above and beyond our ways and thoughts (cf. Is. 55:9).

Similarly, Clark Pinnock and Amos Yong argue that Charismatic-Pentecostal pneumatology stressing the universality (but not universalistic) experience of God through the Spirit may contribute much to a contemporary Christian theology of religions. Pinnock enthusiastically advocates Christian inclusivism based on his understanding of the ever-present activity of the Holy Spirit at all times and places among all peoples. The Holy Spirit crosses cultural and religious boundaries revealing God to honest, open hearts in order to ultimately lead individuals to the full knowledge of Jesus Christ. Affirmation of the provisional nature of truth helps avoid so-called Christian imperialism.<sup>14</sup> Yong ably articulates “pneumatological imagination”, an experience of and orientation to the Holy Spirit. He affirms the presence and activity of the Spirit in other religions while stressing Christian discernment regarding the absence of the divine or presence of the demonic.<sup>15</sup> Yong suggests discernment is a process of divine-human partnership in which the Holy Spirit charismatically gifts us with discriminatory insight and we also critically evaluate observable phenomena. Where religions genuinely contribute to human rehabilitation, to individual and communal wholeness and wellness, there some degree of the divine is present; where they contribute to human debilitation,

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<sup>14</sup> See Clark Pinnock, *Flame of Love: A Theology of the Holy Spirit* (InterVarsity Press: Downer’s Grove, IL, 1994), pp. 185-214.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Amos Yong, “‘Not Knowing Where the Wind Blows ...’: On Envisioning a Pentecostal-Charismatic Theology of Religions,” *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 14 (1999): pp. 81-112 (pp. 81-83) and *Discerning the Spirit(s): A Pentecostal-Charismatic Theology of Religions* (Journal of Pentecostal Theology Supplement Series. Sheffield: Sheffield, England; 2000), pp. 29-30.

diminishing or destroying individual and communal wholeness and wellness, there demonic forces are discovered (John 10:10).<sup>16</sup> Yong's work welds well with strong Pentecostal belief in therapeutic presence, that is, God's gracious presence has a wholesome, healing effect on human lives (Lu 8:40-48). This patently Pentecostal approach to the task of discernment or discrimination is nevertheless not inconsistent with either ancient spirituality or modern anthropology and psychology.<sup>17</sup>

### **Some Basic Problems for a Pentecostal Theology of Religions**

A few representative dilemmas facing Pentecostal theology of religions may serve to suggest orientations in the developing discipline.

#### *Historical*

At first glance the past record of Pentecostalism does not seem especially encouraging regarding non-Christian religions. Rhetoric towards other religions has often been vitriolic.<sup>18</sup> Notable exceptions, however, exist. For example, Douglas Jacobsen points out that Bishop J. H. King, an important pioneer among Classical Pentecostals, articulated an optimistic theology of religions.<sup>19</sup> King's work on religions is characterized by compassion and sophistication.<sup>20</sup> King's theology of religions is clearly controlled by

<sup>16</sup> Yong, *Discerning the Spirit(s)*: pp. 243-55. Traditionally Pentecostals stress testing the fruit of prophets for determining validity or falsity (Matt 7:15-20).

<sup>17</sup> E.g. in the Makarian Homilies see "Patient Endurance and Discrimination", *The Philokalia: The Complete Text* vol. III (compiled by St Nikodimos of the Holy Mountain and St Makarios of Corinth; trans. and ed. by G.E.H. Palmer, Philip Sherrard, and Kallistos Ware. London: Faber and Faber, 1984), pp. 299-311 (esp. pp. 303-04). Freud viewed religion as "symptomatic" (sickness) and Jung as "therapeutic" (cure). See Anthony F. C. Wallace, *Religion: An Anthropological View* (NY: Random, 1966), pp. 13-21. Wallace notes William James identified religious experience in the "rehabilitation of shattered souls", pp. 21-22 and 35.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Yong, *Discerning the Spirit(s)*: pp. 185-87.

<sup>19</sup> Douglas Jacobsen, *Thinking in the Spirit: Theologies of the Early Pentecostal Movement* (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2003), pp. 177-79, 192-93.

<sup>20</sup> E. g. Bishop J. H. King, *Yet Speaketh* (Franklin Springs, GA: Publishing House of the Pentecostal Holiness Church, 1949): pp. 184-88, 212-13. See also J. H. King, *From Passover to Pentecost* (Franklin Springs, GA: Advocate, 1911, 1976 [fourth edition]), pp. 101-04, 109, and *Christ-God's Love Gift*:

Christology. His approach to non-Christian religions is based first on his faith in the eternal and universal Logos made incarnate in Jesus Christ and in his atonement (cf. John 1:1). He does not doubt that some non-Christians have known Christ after a fashion prior to and apart from his incarnation.<sup>21</sup> But for J. H. King the atonement is eternal as well as historical (above time as well as within time), and universal and unconditional (a parallel counterpart to the fall), as well as particular and conditional (requiring a personal response of repentance and faith from those directly and authentically confronted with its verity and reality). In addition, his pneumatology and soteriology are dynamic rather than static.<sup>22</sup> In other words, his entire approach to spirituality, Christian or otherwise, lends itself to an affirmation of varying levels of the Spirit's presence and activity that suggests salvation (if one calls it thus) is a mysterious process with temporal beginnings and eternal developments. Such a view is amicable to an affirmation of the Spirit's activity in unknown ways (cf. John 3:8). Some Pentecostals see this possibility as suggestive of the Spirit's revelatory work among religious others.<sup>23</sup> King himself affirms salvific efficaciousness in general revelation complimented and completed by special revelation.<sup>24</sup> Significantly, a Spirit-filled person does not depend on natural light alone, on "unaided reason", but upon "the illumination of the Spirit", a light that is "all heavenly in origin and nature".<sup>25</sup>

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*Selected Writings of J.H. King: Volume One* (Franklin Springs, GA: Advocate Press, 1969), pp. 21-31, 154-55.

<sup>21</sup> King, *Passover*, pp. 101-02. Pentecostal prophecy teacher and writer George L. Britt goes so far as to say Socrates, Plato, and Confucius can be called "constitutionally Christian", *When Dust Shall Sing: The World Crisis in the Light of Bible Prophecy* (Cleveland, TN: Pathway, 1958), pp. 188-89.

<sup>22</sup> King, *Passover*, pp. 48-51, 95-100.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Yong, "Not Knowing Where the Wind Blows": pp. 81-112.

<sup>24</sup> King, *Passover*, p. 26 and *Yet Speaketh*, pp. 52, 234.

<sup>25</sup> King, *Passover*, p. 125.

Bishop King has no qualms condemning idolatry or immorality wherever he finds them, whether in other faiths or in the Christian faith, but distinguishes religious institutions he perceives as perverse from religious individuals in whom he perceives potential.<sup>26</sup> His attitude toward sincere “heathen” willing to recognize and respond positively to general revelation in creation and conscience based on eternal Christological realities is openly optimistic though not dogmatic. History confirms that several significant early Pentecostals were characterized by openness and inclusiveness.<sup>27</sup> Contemporary Pentecostals are accordingly confronted with a keen responsibility to rediscover, reclaim, and restore optimistic elements of our early heritage regarding our understanding of God’s work in Christ among non-Christian religions.

### *Theological*

A host of issues converge on and cloud over the progress of Pentecostal theology of religions. Issues such as soteriology, revelatory authority, Christology, and many others often threaten to derail the discussion before it can embark. I have indicated elsewhere that above and beyond these admittedly important considerations an overarching essential issue is really theology proper; that is, our foremost consideration must ever be our doctrine of the character of God.<sup>28</sup> Wolfhart Pannenberg asserts that, “In doing theology, the concept of God can never be simply one issue among others. It is the

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<sup>26</sup> King, *Yet Speaketh*, pp. 184-85, 199-200; cf. p. 231.

<sup>27</sup> Charles Parham and G. T. Haywood advocated rather open attitudes toward adherents of other religions, even granting them a privileged place in the eschaton. See Jacobsen, *Thinking in the Spirit*, pp. 41, 212. Cf. some suggestive remarks by E. S. Williams in the first ever Pentecostal systematic theology, *Systematic Theology: Volume I* (Hot Springs, Missouri: Gospel Publishing House, 1991 [1953, 1981]), e. g., pp. 157, 167-68, and 172. Also E. S. Williams, *Systematic Theology: Volume II* (Hot Springs, Missouri: Gospel Publishing House, 1991 [1953, 1981]), e. g. pp. 6-8, 96, 143, 177-78.

<sup>28</sup> Tony Richie, “God’s Fairness to People of All Faiths: A Respectful Proposal to Pentecostals for Discussion Regarding World Religions”, *Pneuma: The Journal of the Society for Pentecostal Studies* (forthcoming Spring of 2006).

central issue, around which everything else is organized.”<sup>29</sup> So then I do not begin doing theology of religions by asking who will be saved or what is revelation or does truth exist only here or also there. My first question is about God. I ask, “Is God fair?” To my mind the question of God’s universal and providential fairness and justice cannot be satisfactorily addressed apart from a position of openness to the possibility of God’s active presence and power among all peoples. Rather than being driven to distraction by preoccupation with secondary or tertiary doctrines Pentecostals need to give ardent attention to the most primary of all doctrines: God.

What kind of God do we serve? Is God one who damns souls without so much as a shot at salvation? Is God for all practical purposes disinterested in the vast majority of humanity? Or do we believe in a God that loves, really loves, the world, the whole world, and everyone in it (cf. Ps 145:9)? The biblical witness regarding Abraham and Sodom is persuasive. Abraham had an obligation to intercede that extended to the point of confronting God on the basis of God’s own character.<sup>30</sup> Abraham boldly braces God: “Will you sweep away the righteous with the wicked?” Then he declares even more dramatically, “Far be it from you! Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?” (vv. 23, 25) The Lord’s patient and positive response to Abraham’s petition teaches that “appealing to God’s essential nature and the fundamental way he rules” is appropriate and acceptable then and now.<sup>31</sup> This incident indicates God “is concerned with and involved in the affairs of all peoples, cities, and nations.”<sup>32</sup> It certainly does not make

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<sup>29</sup> Wolfhart Pannenberg, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), p. 21.

<sup>30</sup> John E. Hartley, *New International Biblical Commentary: Genesis* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2000), pp. 180-84.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*: p. 182.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*: pp. 183-84. Cf. Richie, “God’s Fairness to People of All Faiths”, *Pneuma* (forthcoming: Spring 2006).

salvation (in the sense of deliverance from divine judgment) automatic or inevitable; but it does, in my opinion, show that it is possible and potential. Pentecostals may be fully persuaded that God is ready, willing, and able to make direct or indirect contact with every living human being; that God grants light to everyone that comes into the world; and, that those who are faithful to their light will be judged accordingly, that is, with justice and mercy (cf. John 1:9).

### *Missiology*

As Steve Land so well says, Pentecostals are driven by a passion for the Kingdom that cannot be divorced from an eschatological orientation to Christian evangelism and mission.<sup>33</sup> Pentecostals everywhere enthusiastically “spread the word” in efforts to “win souls”. Pentecostals contend for great commitment to the “Great Commission” (Matt 28:19-20). In a day devoted to dialogue, when some seem to suggest that evangelism among other faiths is offensive and obstructive, Pentecostals can be problematic.

Preeminent scholar on Pentecostalism, Walter J. Hollenweger, however, develops a theology of “dialogical evangelism” that is less rigid and more respectful regarding mutual sharing between religious others that decries a too sharp demarcation between Christian mission and interfaith dialogue. Pentecostalism, especially theologically and missiologically, must come to grips with “bewildering pluralism” within the global movement. He argues that the first Christians were not “theologically homogeneous” either and that could be helpful to contemporary Christians. He further suggests non-Christians may have gifts of healing, and that inclusion in the Church is becoming vaguer as ethical lines are blurring. Hollenweger insists that all Christianity—including

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<sup>33</sup> Steven J. Land, *Pentecostal Spirituality: A Passion for the Kingdom* (JPTSUP, 1; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993).

Pentecostals—and churches are syncretistic, taking “on board many customs and ideas from our pagan past”. He warns Pentecostals-Charismatics have lost an original ecumenical vision but he hopes it may be restored yet. He presents “dialogical evangelism”, based on the encounter of Peter and Cornelius (Acts 10), as a biblical model for contemporary Pentecostals. Significantly, both participants learn from each other as the Holy Spirit is poured out afresh.<sup>34</sup> Overly simplistic schemas calling for either dialogue or evangelism, effectively forcing a frightening choice between interfaith relations or Christian evangelism, are set aside in favor of integrating both listening and speaking in love, that is, sincere dialogue and sensitive witness.

### *Ministry*

While attending a Pentecostal seminary I had one class on “world religions”, a special “J-term” elective taught by a former Hindu who had converted to Christianity. The class consisted of his conversion testimony, a fairly in depth overview of Hinduism, a comparatively quick survey of Buddhism, and some brief remarks about a few other religions. The focus was on a “If you want to win them you need to know this stuff” approach. No real attempt was made at relational understanding. My seminary experience was pre-9/11 and, therefore, understandable if not excusable. After 9/11 ignoring the reality of religious pluralism is irresponsible and incompetent. Even before the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center, Hans Küng argued that “*Peace among the religions is*

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<sup>34</sup> Walter J. Hollenweger, “Critical Issues for Pentecostals” in Allan Anderson and Walter J. Hollenweger, editors, *Pentecostals after a Century: Global Perspectives on a Movement in Transition*. (Journal of Pentecostal Theology Supplement Series 15 (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), pp. 176-91. Sir Norman Anderson used the Peter-Cornelius paradigm in *Christianity and World Religions: The Challenge of Pluralism* (Downer’s Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1984), noting that both benefited by the dialogue; good dialogue may prepare the way for evangelism, or be a part of it; and, dialogue involves an element of risk but it is worth it when carried out with confidence in the lordship of Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit, pp. 188-91.

*the prerequisite for peace among the nations*".<sup>35</sup> Given the temporal and political upheaval of our age that fact might seem enough in itself for confronting the issue of religions. Add the eternal and spiritual wellbeing of humanity to the scenario and the motivation becomes mandatory.

I have an informal impression from non-Pentecostal colleagues at other educational institutions that they do not do much better, if at all. More classes may be offered but they are mostly comparative religions or studies in specific religions rather than theology of religions. Of course, a world (!) of difference exists between a class on world religions or on a world religion and one on theology of religions. The former explains the faiths of major religions, with more or less comparison and contrast, or examines in depth one of these. Pentecostal teacher, scholar, and author Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen defines the latter thusly:

Theology of religions is that discipline of theological studies which attempts to account theologically for the meaning and value of other religions. Christian theology of religions attempts to think theologically about what it means for Christians to live with people of other faiths and about the relationship of Christianity to other religions.<sup>36</sup>

Pentecostal educational institutions, and perhaps non-Pentecostal ones as well, especially those engaged primarily in training clergy, need aggressive attention to Christian theology of religions. In *An Introduction to the Theology of Religions: Biblical, Historical, & Contemporary Perspectives* Kärkkäinen uses an approach that may be

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<sup>35</sup> Hans Küng, *Theology for the Third Millennium: An Ecumenical View* (New York: Anchor Books, 1990), p. 209. (italics original)

<sup>36</sup> Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *An Introduction to the Theology of Religions: Biblical, Historical, & Contemporary Perspectives* (Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), pp. 20.

implemented in Pentecostal/non-Pentecostal educational institutions with positive results. He offers as rationale for including theology of religions in Christian educational curriculum his conviction that graduates require it in training for competency in ministry because they are no longer ministering only to Christians but also to non-Christians.<sup>37</sup> Kärkkäinen introduces and overviews biblical, historical, and contemporary perspectives on theology of religions. He thoroughly presents a great variety of views. Though he critically appraises each and occasionally makes readers aware of his own preferences, he leaves the student/reader ample latitude to make his or her decision.

### CONCLUSION

Contrasting a couple of pairs of concepts seems the best way to bring out the theme of balance with which I began. G. K. Chesterton said, “But granted we all have to keep a balance, the real interest comes in with the question of how that balance can be kept.” Balance may be best kept by paradoxically holding “apparently opposite” passions and convictions in just the right tension so justice is done to both without allowing either to dominate.<sup>38</sup>

#### *Optimistic and Realistic*

Pentecostalism is not pessimistic. Pentecostalism is an exceptionally positive expression of faith. It believes! It believes the Bible is true today; it believes Jesus really died and rose again and that he still saves sinners; it believes for powerful answers to prayer, for miracles and mighty healings; it believes the Holy Spirit still speaks and acts in humble, holy hearts. A Pentecostal theology of religions likewise should shine with luminous hope and optimism. Pentecostal theology of religions should believe that God is

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid: pp. 354-55.

<sup>38</sup> Gilbert K. Chesterton, *Heretics/Orthodoxy* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2002 pr), pp. 237-55 (p. 247).

great enough to reach and touch every soul that has ever been or ever will be and grant unto each one opportunity and ability to share some measure of God's love, light, life, and liberty. It should believe that Jesus Christ is not limited by human understanding or ecclesial ability but that he really is Sovereign Lord over all creation, over Heaven and Earth and everyone in them. It should believe that the Holy Spirit is everywhere all the time and is always energetically acting for good. Therefore, Pentecostal theology of religions can expect "good and perfect gifts" to come down "from the Father of heavenly lights" (Jam 1:17 NIV).

Pentecostals also believe in the Devil. For Pentecostals the demonic realm is all too real. A Pentecostal theology of religions recognizes that diabolical or demonic forces often deign to use religion—any religion, all religions—for perverse purposes. Even when the Devil or a demon may not be directly involved our own human fallenness and frailty often enough assist in accomplishing evil designs. Everything we touch is subject to possible contamination or infection and therefore suspect. So not even religion, that wonderful realm of the sacred and sublime, is entirely safe against onslaughts of evil. Therefore, we must always "test the spirits to see whether they are from God" (1 John 4:1 NIV). Pentecostals cannot uncritically accept and embrace all religions or every religious teaching regardless of our desire to unconditionally accept and embrace all people.

#### *Restorationist and Revisionist*

Pentecostals have a heritage that has sometimes been unknown or ignored: an open and inclusive orientation to what God is doing in people everywhere. That requires rediscovering, reclaiming, and restoring. Pentecostals can go back and pick up the threads of faith that have become frayed with time and disuse. Religious inclusivism can be

found in the Bible, in Christian history and thought, and in the Pentecostal movement very early on. Whatever ideology, whether Fundamentalism or Dispensationalism or some form of Conservatism, got Pentecostals off track to start with, destroying that original vision, should be set aside now. Let Pentecostals “ask for the ancient paths, ask where the good way is, and walk in it” (Jer 6:16 NIV).

Only going back, however, is not really enough; it is not adequate for today’s demands. In fact, some things in our past may be better off forgotten—except to remind us not repeat the same errors. The time has come for the Pentecostal movement to say, “This one thing I do: forgetting what is behind and straining toward that which is ahead, I press on toward the goal” (Pp. 3:13-14). Earlier I mentioned Pentecostal tirades against tepidity. The warning might now well be against “the spirit of timidity” (2 Ti 1:7).

Pentecostals need to prepare bold revision today. Developing a Pentecostal theology of religions requires a certain willingness and readiness to advance against the odds. Many have been negatively programmed so long that positive transformation will come only with courageous and consistent effort. Pentecostal anti-intellectualism is slowly but surely dying. Pentecostal sectarianism must die the same painful death. We are in an ecumenical age. God has ordained that before the eschaton Christ’s Church and God’s Kingdom will exhibit heretofore unheard of unity and harmony. A Pentecostal theology of religions will not only grudgingly acknowledge but gladly embrace the Father’s family in Christ and all those in whom the Spirit of the Son may be found by any means or in any measure. The worse enemy is more unbelief than unlike belief.

My call is for a balanced Pentecostal theology of religions that is neither naïve nor narrow. It neither compromises nor confines either Christ or God’s grace, or the Holy

Spirit's presence and power. Now, how can those of us, Pentecostal and non-Pentecostal, each with our own traditions and perceptions, mutually involved in the interfaith adventure, partner together? Non-Pentecostal friends involved in interfaith efforts may perhaps best partner with Pentecostals in this process by recognizing and respecting parameters of Pentecostal theology of religions. I seriously doubt most Pentecostals will ever evolve into religious pluralists. I certainly hope many Pentecostals will eventually embrace the heritage of Christian inclusivism.