

# Trinity as a Framework for a Theology of Religions

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The doctrine of the Trinity seems to be one of the main stumbling blocks in relating Christian faith to other religions. I quote from a Jewish source: "The Trinity is one of the greatest issues that separate Christianity from Judaism, making the two faiths absolutely irreconcilable."<sup>1</sup> To undergird their rejection of Trinitarian theology Jews remind Christians of verses from the Tanakh, which Christians acknowledge as their Old Testament: Verses like Deuteronomy 4:35: "Yahweh, He is God; there is no other besides Him." Or Isaiah 45:5: "I am Yahweh, and there is no other; Besides Me there is no God."<sup>2</sup> In the New Testament a very similar verse is to be found: "there is one God; and there is none other but he" (Mark 12:32). Jews interpret such assertions as a refutation of the later developed doctrine of the Trinity.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> I took this quotation from the facebook-website of "Jews for Judaism", an international organization designed to strengthen Judaism and to counter Christian missionaries whose evangelistic efforts are directed toward Jews. URL = <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3OnwZluFjwA&feature=youtu.be>> (13.02.2014).

<sup>2</sup> URL = <<http://www.bible.ca/Trinity/Trinity-oneness-unity-one-god.htm>>

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Lapide & Moltmann, *Jüdischer Monotheismus – christliche Trinitätslehre* (München 1979); Heino Sonnemans, "Der einzige und drei-eine Gott. Trinität im Disput mit Judentum und Islam", in Ferdinand Hahn (ed), *Zion – Ort der Begegnung* (Bodenheim 1993).

According to the Qur'an Jesus explicitly rejects the concept of Trinity which is portrayed as a heavenly nuclear family of the Father, his wife Mary and their son Jesus. Sura 5:116-117 reads:

And (remember) when Allah will say (on the Day of Resurrection): 'O 'Iesa (Jesus), son of Maryam (Mary)! Did you say unto men: Worship me and my mother as two gods besides Allah?' He will say: 'Glory be to you! It was not for me to say that which I had no right (to say).

Trinity for Muslims is a Christian aberration of the holy truth of monotheism. God is one and there is no God beside him. The singularity of God is threatened if Jesus is taught to be the incarnated word of God.

The Indian religions – summarized as Hinduism – seem to have lesser difficulties with a Trinitarian understanding of God. The concept of *Trimurti* – which expresses the affiliation of Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva as representatives of the three cosmic functions of creation, preservation and destruction or transformation – looks like an analogy. But the differences outweigh the similarities. According to the monistic schools of Hinduism, those analogies to Trinity are subordinated functions of the higher impersonal reality (Brahman), whereas the Christian understanding of Trinity is believed to be Godself (the 'nature' of God) as the ultimate reality. Every God of the Hindu triad has an eternal consortium

i.e. Brahma and Saraswati, Vishnu and Laxmi and Shiva and Shakti which ends up in formulation of a 'hexa (six) - unity' rather than a 'tri (three) - unity'.<sup>4</sup> But how can the ultimate reality be three- or even sixfold in itself and not eternal Oneness, Hindus ask. Thus in his contribution to "The Blackwell companion to Hinduism" Gauri Viswanathan states: "To Hindus (seeking rational bases in religion) the concept of the Trinity was one of Christianity's most vexing puzzles."<sup>5</sup>

Let us finally take a brief look at Buddhism. The Mahayana-doctrine of Tri-kāya – the three bodies of Buddha<sup>6</sup> – often is called the "Buddhist Trinity". It consists of *Dharmakaya*, the Buddha-body, the universal principle as ultimate reality within all things, yet transcendent beyond all things. It is the Emptiness, or Buddha-Mind (depending on which of two major schools of Buddhism one follows), which is beyond comprehension. The second body is *Sambhogakaya*, the body of enjoyment, or bliss, a sphere of pure consciousness, an exalted place where the assembled buddhas receive the Buddha's teachings. The third body is *Nirmanakaya*, the body of appearances, or the "transformation body". This is the physical body of the historical Buddha.

Obviously the Christian doctrine of the Holy Trinity could be comparable to this Buddhist teaching only in a very superficial and formal way! The Buddha-bodies are successive emanations from each other. The second and the third have no existence and are only the appearances of the first. Thus they are understood to be "empty dharmas". Only Dharmakaya as the Buddha-principle is regarded as the ultimate reality. Therefore the three bodies cannot be thought of as being in a quasi-social mutual relation to each other. Again we have to concede

that the Christian doctrine of the Trinity – even if in Buddhism it was not so harshly disputed as in Judaism and Islam – is not compatible with Buddhist teaching. How then can the doctrine of the Trinity become regarded as a framework for a theology of religions?

I will present three different answers to that question, three models which were and are suggested in the recent discussions on how a theology of religions can and should be elaborated. The first one I call the *ontological and phenomenology-of-religions* model, the second the *functionalist and structuralist* model and the third the *confessional* model. Those three models of applying a Trinitarian concept for a theology of religions are not mutually exclusive but can become combined with each other, because they operate in different frames of reference, use different perspectives and highlight different aspects of the doctrine of the Trinity. My own position will be a combination of a specific interpretation of the second model (in terms of philosophy of religion) with the third model (in terms of theology).

## 1. The ontological and phenomenology-of-religions model

According to the first model the doctrine of the Trinity points at the basic structure of being (a Trinitarian principle) as rooted in its divine origin. It is elaborated as a wider philosophical, meta-physical ontology which assumes that the whole cosmos is consisting of triadic structures. Augustin looked for "vestigia trinitatis" – traces of the Trinity – in all reality, mainly in the human soul. Hegel applied the triadic structure to his analysis of history. The ontological and historical Trinitarian principle reaches far beyond the Christian doctrine of the Trinity. It needs to be unfolded on the one hand as a supra-Christian metaphysics, i.e. as a key-concept to understand the pattern of cosmic reality and history, including the history of religions, and on the other hand as a threefold pattern of religious experiences and thus of a phenomenology of religions. For portraying that model I refer to *Raimon Panikkar* who is one of its main proponents in the recent and current discussion on theology of re-

<sup>4</sup> Madathilparampil M. Ninan, *The Development of Hinduism* (Unknown 2008), 184-206.

<sup>5</sup> *The Blackwell companion to Hinduism* / ed. by Gavin Flood (Oxford 2003), 36.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Reinhold Bernhardt, "Der Leib Christi und die drei Leiber Buddhas. Der Leib als Motiv in metaphorischer Sprache", in Aus der Au & Plüss (eds), *Körper – Kulte. Wahrnehmungen von Leiblichkeit in Theologie, Religions- und Kulturwissenschaften* (Zürich 2007), 151-175.

ligions. Panikkar draws upon Christian, Hindu and Buddhist traditions and creates a philosophy of religions which is based on a triadic ontology, phenomenology and epistemology. He teaches that in all religious experience and thus in all religions a triadic structure is inherent which consists of three dimensions, three types of spirituality<sup>7</sup>: The 'person' of the Father correlates to an *apophatic* spirituality which focusses on the divine mystery, the unknown, silent, empty God beyond God (Tillich), the nirvana and sunyata of Buddhism, the Deitas of Meister Eckhart. The 'person' of the Son correlates to a spirituality of a *personal* God, who is acting in the world and to whom the believers pray. And the 'person' of the Spirit correlates to a *mystical* spirituality, which experiences the Divine as a field of force, as energy and power. It strives for a mystical union, forgetful of all distinction. The three spiritualities – Panikkar terms them "iconolatry", "personalism" and "mysticism" – need not to be separated from each other but relate to each other. They are different responses to the experience of reality as a whole, which Panikkar calls the "cosmotheandric experience" (or "vision"). He also speaks of a "cosmotheandric principle" and explains it as follows:

The cosmotheandric principle could be stated by saying that the divine, the human and the earthly ... are the three irreducible dimensions which constitute the real, i.e., any reality inasmuch as it is real.<sup>8</sup>

God, Man and the World are not three distinct realities but three interacting dimensions of the one and the whole reality. That means: Every being exists in three coexisting relations and thus

<sup>7</sup> Raimon Panikkar, *The Trinity and the Religious Experience of Man* (Maryknoll 1973).

<sup>8</sup> Raimon Panikkar, *The Cosmotheandric Experience: Emerging Religious Consciousness* / ed. by Scott Eastham (Maryknoll 1993, ix). With a slightly different emphasis Panikkar stated: "There is God, a Source, an Origin, an Abyss, Silence, Nothingness, Non-being. There is also an Image, a Result, a Book, a World, an Offspring, a People, Being. There is further a Return, a Love, an all-permeating Energy, a Spirit. There is Heaven, Earth and Man, etc." ("Cosmic Evolution, Human History and Trinitarian Life", in *The Teilhard Review* (London) XXV/3, 70.)

is qualified by three dimensions: as a created entity it exists in relation to the divine and is qualified by the dimension of "infinite inexhaustibility"<sup>9</sup>, as an experienced entity it exists in the relation to human consciousness; and as a worldly entity it exists as a material object in nature and history.

The cosmotheandric intuition is the totally integrated vision of the *seamless fabric of the entire reality*... the undivided consciousness of the totality.<sup>10</sup>

Trinity for Panikkar is not a specific Christian idea but a general religious and philosophical concept. He derives his explanation of that "radical Trinity"<sup>11</sup> not only from the (Catholic) Christian tradition but also from the Hindu advaita-Philosophy, from Buddhism and from Philosophical reflection. Trinity in that broad understanding is a way to structure the world and to recognize its spiritual traditions. The Christian understanding of the triune God can be seen as one specific religious manifestation of that general concept. Because Panikkar sees all religions as being founded in a Trinitarian structure, he states: Trinity is "the junction where the authentic spiritual dimensions of all religions meet"<sup>12</sup>. Thus he expects a coming convergence of the religions. That does not mean that they – in their current shapes – will be merged together. There will be a transformation or metamorphosis into the Spirit.

Panikkar does not tackle the question of how to relate the Trinity to the existing world religions extensively. According to Ewert H. Cousins' memory of personal conversations with him, Panikkar in his earlier period of working assigned specific religions to the three dimen-

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. 61.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. 1 (emphasis R.P.).

<sup>11</sup> That was the title of the sixth of Panikkars Gifford Lectures "The Trinity and Atheism. The Dwelling of the Divine in the Contemporary World" in 1989. See: Camilia Gangasingh MacPherson, *A Critical Reading of the Development of Raimon Panikkar's Thought on the Trinity* (Lanham 1996), 67-70.

<sup>12</sup> Raimon Panikkar, *The Trinity* (footnote 7), 42.

sions<sup>13</sup>: Buddhism is the religion of the silence of the Father. The Abrahamic religions – Judaism, Christianity and Islam – are religions of the revelation of the Son. And Hinduism represents the unity of the Spirit. In his later works Panikkar has not repeated and not elaborated that position.<sup>14</sup>

I will compare Panikkar's approach now with Gisbert Greshake's application of the doctrine of the Trinity to a theology of religions. Greshake, a Roman Catholic scholar who taught at the University of Freiburg in Germany, stays closer to the specific Christian understanding of that doctrine but extends it to be a framework in which the plurality of religions can be interpreted. He regards the Trinitarian approach as an overarching theological theory which allows to assign the major religions of the world as representatives of basic types of religions, respectively religious spiritualities, to the 'persons' of the Trinity.

In his voluminous and profound book on Trinity – first published in 1997<sup>15</sup> – Greshake marked the Trinitarian theology as basic-theory ("Basistheorie") for interrelating the religions. That is not to say that the Trinitarian belief or at least triadic structures can be identified in all the religions as a primordial phenomenon ("Urphänomen"<sup>16</sup>), which could lead the plurality of religions into a unity, as Panikkar envisaged it. Greshake asks how the understanding of God and the relation to God is conceptualized in the religions and he distinguishes between three types, which are in some respects similar to the types Panikkar depicted but in other respects different from those. In the *apophatic religions* the

divine reality is primarily understood as an unfathomable mystery, beyond all names and images. God is conceived of as the nameless ultimate point of reference which transcends all polarities; all and nothing, the totally Other. Greshake puts the "mystical" religions in that category, mainly Buddhism, and affiliates them to the first 'person' of the Trinity. In the *theistic religions* God is conceived of as a transcendent personal counterpart of humanity who is in communication with his creation, actively engaged in it and leading it to final salvation. The relation to God is personal, not mystical in kind. The relation is characterized by God's revelation and by human's existential response to it. Religions of that type, according to Greshake are affiliated to the second 'person' of the Trinity, God, the Son. The third type comprises the *pantheistic religions* which stress the immanence of the Divine. The divine reality is understood as being inward in all beings. God is the essence of the cosmos, Brahman and Atman are coincident. The main representative of that type is Hinduism (with its Advaita-philosophy). It correlates to the third 'person' of the Trinity.

Greshake concludes that the correlation of those three types of religion with the three 'persons' of the Trinity urges to regard the doctrine of the Trinity as a centre of integration, as an invitation to see the Absolute in three perspectives, and to acknowledge three ways of experiencing it. Whenever one of those types is declared to be the one and only way of experiencing the divine reality, the doctrine of the Trinity can help to widen the horizon and to overcome such an exclusivism. Thus for Greshake Trinitarian theology becomes the key to understand the diversity of religions and can be considered as the "absolute religion"<sup>17</sup>. Notabene, he does not claim that *Christianity* is the absolute religion. Christianity belongs to the theistic type of religions. The doctrine of the Trinity transcends the Christian religion and leads it into a universality which allows to integrate the plurality of religions. Unlike Panikkar, Greshake does not draw from the sources of other religions. But like Panikkar he universalizes the concept of the Trinity and applies it to a phenomenology of religions.

<sup>13</sup> Ewert H. Cousins, "Panikkar's Advaitic Trinitarianism", in J. Prabhu (ed), *The Intercultural Challenge of Raimon Panikkar* (Maryknoll 1996), 128f.

<sup>14</sup> For further elaboration of Panikkar's understanding of the trinity see: Camilia Gangasingh MacPherson, *A Critical Reading* (footnote 11); Keith E. Johnson, *Rethinking the Trinity and Religious Pluralism. An Augustinian Assessment* (Downers Grove 2011), 143-156; 166-182; Joseph Benoy, *Trinity as an all-embracing Reality. A study based on Raimon Panikkar's understanding of Trinity* (Hamburg: 2012).

<sup>15</sup> Gisbert Greshake, *Der dreieine Gott. Eine trinitarische Theologie* (Freiburg/Br. u.a. 1997).

<sup>16</sup> Ibid 505.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid 512.

The *problem* with such a typological phenomenology arises from its vigorous generalizations. It is highly problematic to assign a certain understanding of the divine and of the relation between the human and the divine to a specific religion as a whole. In Hinduism, however, there are also theistic strands, in Christianity there are mystic and apophatic spiritualities. The differences within the family of the theistic religions are immense. Does it make sense to subsume them in one of three types and correlate the three types within a Trinitarian scheme? As we saw, Panikkar in his later works refrained from assigning specific religions to the 'persons' of the Trinity and suggested that the three dimensions – the apophatic, the personal and the mystical dimension – can be found in *each* religion.

But even if the proponents of such an approach claim that it is not an expression of a superiority of Christianity over other religions, it is obvious that they assume that Christian faith realizes the Trinitarian principle in the most lucid way. In terms of *epistemology* it demands superiority. In grasping the universal religious truth Christian faith is justified to claim a divine enlightenment which goes beyond the insight of other religions.

Other – especially Roman Catholic – theologians like Gavin D' Costa<sup>18</sup> or Jacques Dupuis<sup>19</sup>

come close to that universalistic and inclusivistic understanding of the Trinity.<sup>20</sup>

## 2. The functionalist and structuralist model

The second model, which I call functionalist and structuralist, also distinguishes between the Christian doctrine of the Trinity and a general concept of trinitarian thinking, and regards the former as a substantiation of the latter. Trinitarian thinking is not to be understood as a Trinitarian principle which can be used as a scheme to classify the religions by assigning them to one of the three vertexes of the Trinitarian triangle, as the early Panikkar and Greshake suggested. It does not refer primarily to a metaphysical analysis of being and/or to a phenomenology of religious experiences (or spiritualities) but to a philosophical reflection on the relation between the Absolute and its mediation into the sphere of the finite reality. Thus trinitarian thinking – according to that model – elaborates the logic of revelation.

As a starting point, I take *Paul Tillich*, who distinguishes "trinitarian thinking" from the specific Christian doctrine of the Trinity.<sup>21</sup> "Trinitarian thinking" arises from three perceptions of and reflections on the divine ground of being in its relation to the finite reality: First, if the Absolute is claimed to manifest itself in history it needs to have a pole of immanence in itself. The concept of the Trinity relates the absolute element and the concrete element within God – God in his aseity and God in his self-mediation. Secondly, if God is thought to be a dynamic principle and source of life, he needs to be

<sup>18</sup> Gavin D'Costa, *The Meeting of Religions and the Trinity* (Maryknoll 2000); "The Trinity in Interreligious Dialogues", in Gilles Emery, O.P.; Matthew Levering (ed), *The Oxford Handbook of the Trinity*, (Oxford: 2011), 573-585.

<sup>19</sup> Jacques Dupuis, *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism* (Maryknoll 1997), 254-279; *Christianity and the Religions. From Confrontation to Dialogue* (Maryknoll 2003), 90-95; 123f. Dupuis states: "As the tradition has persistently sought and found 'traces' of the Trinity (vestigial trinitatis) in creation and more especially, in the spiritual activity of the human being, so must we search for and discover similar traces, outside the Biblical tradition, in the religious life of individual persons and the religious traditions to which they belong. They too in some way echo in history the Father's eternal uttering of the Word and issuing of the Spirit" (*Towards a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism*, 227f.).

<sup>20</sup> For discussion of approaches to a Trinitarian theology of religions see: Declan Marmion; Rik van Nieuwenhove (ed), *An Introduction to the Trinity*, Cambridge 2011, 224-237; Keith E. Johnson, *Rethinking the Trinity and Religious Pluralism. An Augustinian Assessment* (Downers Grove 2011), 224-237.

<sup>21</sup> Paul Tillich, *Systematische Theologie I*, 8th ed. Berlin / New York 1987, 290; *Systematische Theologie II*, 8th ed. Berlin / New York 1987, 155. See the presentation and discussion of: Pan-Chiu Lai, *Towards a Trinitarian Theology of Religions: A Study of Paul Tillich's Thought* (Kampen 1994).

thought of as being in a process of being-in-himself, going-beyond-himself and reintegrating the experienced otherness into himself. Trinitarian thinking expresses this principle of life. Thirdly, it allows to integrate three different forms of experiencing the divine as the absolute creative power (as opposed to the finitude of human life), as a manifestation of saving love (as opposed to the estrangement of human life) and as the power which elevates the human consciousness to unambiguous life (as opposed to the ambiguities of human life). Such experiences are common to all humans and as such overarch all religions and cultures.

Ola Sigurdson's suggestion that "[t]he Trinity as a practical doctrine provides us with a grammar of how Christianity could relate to other religions"<sup>22</sup> also seems to point towards a functionalist and structuralist (in his term: "grammatic") understanding of the Trinitarian thinking. According to him it shows that "difference" (in general) has its origin in God:

The intra-divine difference is not a violent or agnostic difference ..., but a difference of love. The relationship between similarities and differences, as well as between presence and absence, is given a fruitfully complex formulation by the doctrine of the Trinity.<sup>23</sup>

In my interpretation of Trinitarian thinking according to the functionalist and structuralist model I do not take Tillich's existential philosophy of religion as a frame of reference but try to target an interreligious understanding of the logic of revelation. Contrary to Tillich I do not regard the Christian doctrine of the Trinity as a specification of the general Trinitarian thinking but take it as point of reference from which I ask for structural and functional analogies in other religious traditions.

Instead of applying the Trinitarian approach to the cosmos as a whole and to the types of religious spirituality (as Panikkar and Greshake did) or to elaborate it as an extrapolation of basic ex-

istential polarities and dynamics (as Tillich did) I take it – in regard of its function – as a formal scheme which gives an answer to the question of how the transcendence of God can be theologically mediated with his twofold immanence in history: his immanence in one central revelatory event on the one hand and in his omnipresence on the other. Thus it displays the inner logic of the process of revelation and functions as a theological tool which solves the problem of how to relate the aseity of the revealer with his self-communication into history and with the God-given human perception of that revelation.

In such a formalized interpretation the Trinitarian scheme can become applied to other religions, since all revelatory-religions have to cope with that problem in one way or the other. Thus in the structuralist-functionalist perspective the *Christian* doctrine of the Trinity can be understood as a specific answer to that general problem. Every revelatory-religion ("Offenbarungsreligion") has to give an answer to the question of how the event of the divine revelation at a certain time and space in history can be related to the Divine in its eternal transcendence, on the one hand, and how it can be considered as enlightening and transforming humans throughout the subsequent history on the other. Every revelatory-religion has to make plausible how the revelation refers to the revealer and to its addressees. Interpreted in such a functional and structural way, the Christian doctrine of the Trinity proves to be a necessary tool to solve the theological problem which occurs analogously in other revelatory religions as well.

In Christianity that problem arose historically with the understanding of Jesus Christ as the incarnated Word of God in history and it consists in two questions. The first question is: How can the divinity of the revelation be thought of without jeopardising the divinity of God? And the second: How can one relate the divine spirit – the God-granted spiritual enlightenment which, according to the Christian theology, is necessary for receiving, adopting and internalizing that revelation – to the divinity of God? The basic conviction of Christian epistemology is that only the Divine itself can open the eyes for perceiving the revelation as revelation and only the divine

<sup>22</sup> Ola Sigurdson, "Is the Trinity a Practical Doctrine?", in Werner G. Jeanrond; Aasulv Lande (ed), *The Concept of God in Global Dialogue*, Maryknoll 2005), 124.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

itself can make the revelation affect the lives of humans in a salvific way.

The doctrine of the Trinity offers an ingenious solution for that double problem: It states that the revelation in Jesus Christ is divine in its nature, but not simply identical with the divinity of God. The same applies for the spiritual power of God. The Godhead, the revelation of God and the spiritual power of God which makes the revelation powerful to the humans, are related in an essential unity, but not in an undifferentiated identity.

Based on such a functionalist and structuralist interpretation, we can ask now whether Judaism, Islam and all the religions which refer as well to a central revelatory-event in history, need to develop a functional analogy to the doctrine of the Trinity. All revelational religions have to relate the divine revelation in history – like the Torah, the Qur'an or Jesus Christ – to the divinity of God, on the one hand, and to the self-efficient radiation of that revelation into the lives of the humans of subsequent times, on the other.

Especially if the manifestation of the divine revelation is regarded as being of divine essence – like the Muslim doctrine of the eternal nature of the Qur'an does – then this question becomes inevitable. In the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> century, the Islamic theologians debated the issue as whether the Qur'an had been created or was eternal in essence. Having assumed that the Qur'an had been created, how could it then be regarded as a direct and essential revelation of God? If, however, the Qur'an was eternal in nature, how would that eternity relate to the eternal God? Referring to the Suras 43,2-4 and 85,22, the Islamic theology decided to consider the Qur'an as eternal in quality. The question how that doctrine is compatible with the basic belief in the oneness of God (*tawhīd*) was left open. The Islamic theology did not distinguish between the singularity of God and an inner difference within God. Monotheism only could be thought of as outer and inner unity – without difference. The Christian understanding of God as being One (outer unity) but at the same time internally differentiated in three dimensions which are related to each other, could not become adopted, because it was interpreted as tri-theism. Thus the question of how to reconcile the postulate of the Oneness of God

with the postulate of the eternal nature of God's revelation remained open.<sup>24</sup>

In Judaism the Torah was not conceived of as being divine in its essence. It is created and can be seen as the first created being – created even before the throne of God, according to the Bereschit Rabba 1,4, 2<sup>nd</sup> part.<sup>25</sup> Though it is not understood as an incarnation or inlibration of the Word of God, it also is considered to have two dimensions – a heavenly and an earthly. Even here we can ask if there are – and need to be – structural analogies to the Christian doctrine of the Trinity: Jahwe (God in himself), the Torah (God's normative revelation in history with its 'two natures') and the Schechinah (the mighty presence of God in the mode of his spirit).

The second model of understanding the doctrine of the Trinity in the context of a theology of religions refers to the structural logic of the revelatory-religions. It allows to ask for structural and functional analogies between those religions and to depict similarities and differences. It does not develop a Trinitarian scheme as an overarching framework in which the religions can be included in terms of an inclusivism based on claims of superiority, but functions as a heuristic method which can be used in a dialogical transreligious theology that asks how in other religious traditions the modes of divine immanence are related to each other and to the divine transcendence.

### 3. The confessional model

The third model – I label it tentatively the *confessional* model – on the one hand refrains from widening the Trinitarian approach to a religious super-theory and on the other hand goes beyond a formal analysis of the structure and function of Trinitarian thinking in an interreligious perspective (but can easily become combined with it). It does neither extend the Christian doctrine to an ontological meta-theology (including ontology and epistemology) nor does it reduce it to a for-

<sup>24</sup> Muna Tatari, Klaus von Stosch (ed), *Trinität - Anstoss für das islamisch-christliche Gespräch* (Paderborn 2013).

<sup>25</sup> URL = <<http://bereschitrabba.hypotheses.org/91>> (13.02.2014)

mal heuristic principle. It does neither refer to types of spirituality, like the first model, nor to the logic of revelation like the second. It takes, however, as its starting point the material content of the Christian doctrine of the Trinity and unfolds that content in a way which expresses God's universal presence that does not leave the adherents of non-Christian religions unaffected. The doctrine of the Trinity entails enormous potentials of universality to consider God (as Christians know him from Christ) being salvifically engaged in the whole cosmos, the whole history of humankind and thus also in the history of religions. The potential of that doctrine to express the universality of the salvific grace of God makes it a suitable framework for a theology of religions. Theology of religions in my understanding is the exposition of the belief in the universal grace of God. In opposition to a Christcentrism which sees Jesus Christ as the one and only bottleneck of God's relation to humanity on the one hand, and in contrast to the assumption of a plurality of ways to salvation on the other, I propose a Trinitarian approach which allows to conceive of the religions as included in the universal salvific presence of God.

The confessional model takes Trinity in its Christian understanding as the basis for a Christian theology of religions which pursues the question of how Non-Christians and non-Christian religious traditions can be appraised theologically. It does not evolve from an 'observer' standpoint – be it the perspective of philosophy-of-religion or the perspective of phenomenology-of-religion, but from an 'insider' point of view, i.e. from the perspective of Christian faith or rather dogmatics. Therefore it is in accordance with the "mutual inclusivism" which I prefer as a position in the theology-of-religions-debate.<sup>26</sup> That approach strives to develop the theology of religions from the centre of the Christian faith.

What is that centre? Wherever and whenever the content of Christian faith was summarized in the history of Christianity the authors of the confessions felt compelled to apply a Trinitarian

structure. Trinity is the structural principle of Christian faith. It seemed not possible to reduce the creed to only one article. It needed three articles to express what Christian faith is all about.

*The first article* refers to God, the creator and sustainer of the whole cosmos. God is not the tribal God of Jews and Christians or of the adherents of any other religion, but the ground of all being, the ground of history and that includes the history of religions as well. According to the biblical witness, God created every human being in his image and likeness, spreads his blessing not only to the people of Israel but according to Jes 19,25 and many other testimonies in the Old and New Testament also to other people.

The fundamental characteristic of God (which is not only an attribute but his very essence) is relationality, God's self-transcendence towards creation. The symbol of God's relation to creation is the covenant. The scriptures of the Bible mention a series of covenants: First, the "everlasting covenant" with Noah (Gen 9,1-17), which spans over the whole creation; second, the covenant with Abraham (Gen 17,1-14) which includes all of its descendants, so that it can be interpreted as including the adherents of the so called Abrahamic religions; third, the covenant with Moses at the Sinai, which refers to the people of Israel (Ex 19-24), and fourth, the "new" covenant in Jesus which offers God's grace to all the humans who relate to God in the name of Jesus Christ. Thus not only the second article of the Trinitarian Creed speaks about the salvific will of God but also the first (and the third article). It grounds that salvific will in the very essence of God.

The character of a theology of religions which draws on a theology of covenants ("Föderaltheologie") depends on how the covenants are thought to be interrelated to each other: Are they related in an exclusive or an inclusive way? The *exclusive* interpretation understands the covenant in Christ as a suspension of the former covenants, especially the covenant at the Sinai. The former covenants are regarded as invalid. According to the *inclusive* understanding, however, the later covenants do not rule out the former but *confirm* them on the one hand and *specify* them on the other.

<sup>26</sup> See *Ende des Dialogs? Die Begegnung der Religionen und ihre theologische Reflexion* (Zürich 2006), 206-275.



*The second article* of the Creed refers to God's self-representation in Jesus Christ. Especially that core-conviction of Christian faith seems to be a stumbling-block of a theology of religions. There are New-Testament-testimonies which affirm emphatically that salvation is in Jesus Christ alone (Acts 4:12). John 3:5 insists on the necessity of faith in Christ and baptism. And John 14:6 states that Christ is "the way, the truth and the life" and adds "no one comes to the Father but through me".

It is necessary to begin with a hermeneutical reflection on how to understand such verses. The claim to *exclusiveness*, to being the sole truth, holds *within* the Christian faith. It is an expression of the existential certainty of that faith, an expression of the confidence in that 'way to true life'. As such it is to be understood not as an objective truth (in terms of an *adaequatio intellectus et rei*) but as a confessional articulation of faith. To confess "Christ alone (solus Christus) is the way to God, no one comes to the Father but through him" is to say something about the Christian's adherence to Christ. It is not to state a universal abstract truth "about", but a personal testimony "to".

True as it is that God's self-representation in Jesus Christ holds good not only for Christians but for all men and women, it is also true that Christian faith is founded on the belief that the fullness of the Spirit of God is disclosed solely in Christ. Of course this path is potentially open to all men and women, but those who do not take it need not necessarily be on the wrong path. As the key concept of a Christology which holds fast to the divinity of Christ while not limiting divine revelation to Christ alone, the idea of *representation* seems to me to be particularly suited. It allows to understand and speak of Jesus Christ in a personal and relational way, both as the representative of God in the midst of human beings, and as the representative of authentically being human as well. A Christology which develops out of this concept of representation might indeed bring about the kind of theologically grounded openness which would allow and ask for dialogical relationships to other religions.

I am using the term "representation" in the sense of "making present": Jesus made present the presence of God. He embodied this presence

so intensely that he was called the "image of the invisible God" (Col 1:15; cf. II Cor 4:4). Because Jesus was "inhabited" by God, suffused with God's Spirit, he embodied the God-presence and conveyed it to those who became his followers. As a person who lived – utterly and totally – through the relationship with God, he personified the authentic human being: wholly open for and receptive to the God who is the ground of creation.

In this light then, representation means more than serving as the "delegate" for another, more than acting and speaking in the name of one who is himself absent. In a way the term "representation" comes close to the meaning of "revelation" which is not to be understood as a 'message' from God who himself is not present, but on the contrary: representation becomes the mode of and vehicle of God's presence, of his effective *Being-Here*.<sup>27</sup> Jesus Christ presents – represents – God. In this way, for his adherents a salvific relation to God becomes possible in the encounter with Christ, but that does not mean that *extra Christum* (beyond Christ) there can be no *self-representation*, no *self-representation* of God.

That enduring difference between the revealer and the revelation has already been stated by Thomas Aquinas: "Though the divine nature in the person of the Son was wholly united with the Son's human nature, nevertheless this could not encompass, could not incorporate, as it were, the entirety of the power of the Divinity."<sup>28</sup>

That is to say: Jesus Christ represents God as the "Deus semper maior", the God who is always 'greater', even 'greater' as the revelation in Christ; the God "who dwells in light inaccessible" (I Tim 6:16). In acknowledging that God remains an unfathomable mystery *even in his revelation*, it becomes possible to believe, and to expect, that God's revelation in Christ does not exhaust God's being which is inexhaustible. It is exactly the doctrine of the Trinity which allows to express that unity-in-difference between the revealer and the revelation.

<sup>27</sup> On the concept of representation see: Stephan Schaefer, *Stellvertretung: Begriffsgeschichtliche Studien zur Soteriologie* (Tübingen 2004), 171-238.

<sup>28</sup> STh III, 10, 1, ad. 2.

What is it, which is "represented" in Jesus Christ? What is the 'Christ-content'? As I understand the New Testament testimonies, this "what" is God's all-embracing and unconditional grace and attentiveness. Wolfgang Pfüller defines the Christ-content as "limitless, self-offering love in radically trusting confidence in God and in the coming of God's kingdom"<sup>29</sup>. Hans Kessler understands the Christ-content as "true human being – human being entirely in accord with God's being."<sup>30</sup>

This Christ-content becomes real in the Christ-event but is not restricted to it; rather, it exists already before that event, drawing it onward, and extends beyond it. The event "represents" the communion between God and the human being, which God has initiated and is hereby making it present. The Christ-content is universal and extends beyond the Christ-event. If the Christ-content would be tied exclusively to the Christ-event, it forfeits its universal significance. The historical representation in Jesus points to a reality which precedes the particular representation – while still being genuinely revealed in and by it. The self-communication of God is *concentrated* in Jesus Christ but not *confined* to him.

The *third article* of the Christian Creed gives testimony to the universal presence of God in the power of his spirit. According to the biblical testimonies, that power is creative and healing, brings forth life, inspires belief, love and hope, creates reconciliation, understanding and communion, leads into new horizons of awareness and crosses borders of languages, of cultures and religions.

Thus a number of theologians like Amos Yong<sup>31</sup>, Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen<sup>32</sup>, Clark H. Pin-

nock<sup>33</sup>, and Stanley J. Samartha<sup>34</sup> suggested that pneumatology is especially suitable to constitute a basis for theology of religions. "The Spirit's economy," says Yong, "liberate theology from the categorical constraints of Christology."<sup>35</sup> Thus, for Yong

a Pneumatological starting point for Christian theology of religions provides an alternative categorical framework, allowing for the religions to be heard on their own terms.<sup>36</sup>

He puts forward the hypothesis that God is universally present by the Spirit. God, in this sense, sustains the religions for divine purpose. In ushering in the kingdom of God the Spirit employs the religions. As a consequence, Yong suggests that in the religions there are signs of the kingdom to be discovered.

For Samartha, John 3:8 shows that the essence of the Spirit is "bondless freedom".<sup>37</sup> Through this, he claims that the Holy Spirit cannot be confined to the Christian church but is present in and among all the faith-communities and beyond. That includes his effectiveness as a *criti-*

<sup>29</sup> Wolfgang Pfüller, *Die Bedeutung Jesu im interreligiösen Horizont: Überlegungen zu einer religiösen Theorie in christlicher Perspektive* (Münster 2001), 208 (translation R.B.).

<sup>30</sup> Hans Kessler, "Christologie", in Theodor Schneider (ed), *Handbuch der Dogmatik* vol. I (Düsseldorf 1995<sup>2</sup>), 392ff (translation R.B.).

<sup>31</sup> Amos Yong, *Beyond the Impasse. Toward a Pneumatological Theology of Religions*; id., *The Spirit Poured Out on All Flesh, Pentecostalism and the Possibility of Global Theology* (Grand Rapids 2005).

<sup>32</sup> Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen: *Toward a Pneumatological Theology: Pentecostal and Ecumenical Perspective on Ecclesiology, Soteriology and Theology of Mission* (Lanham 2002); "How to Speak of the Spirit Among Religions: Trinitarian 'Rules' for a Pneumatological Theology of Religions" in *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 30/3, July 2006, 121-127; "Pentecostal Pneumatology of Religions: The Contribution of Pentecostalism to Our Understanding of the Work of God's Spirit in the World" in Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen (ed), *The Spirit in the World: Emerging Pentecostal Theologies in Global Contexts* (Grand Rapids 2009), 155-180.

<sup>33</sup> Clark Pinnock: *Flame of Love: A Theology of the Holy Spirit* (Downers Grove 1996). See Kärkkäinen, *Toward a Pneumatological Theology* (footnote 32), ch. 6.

<sup>34</sup> Stanley J. Samartha, *One Christ-Many Religions: Toward a Revised Christology* (Maryknoll 1991); *Between Two Cultures. Ecumenical Ministry in a Pluralist World* (Bangalore 1997).

<sup>35</sup> Amos Yong, *Beyond the Impasse* (footnote 31), 167.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Stanley J. Samartha, *Between Two Cultures* (footnote 34), 73-74.

*cal* principle, which criticizes religious phenomena that react against the Kingdom of God.

According to the confessional model of a Trinitarian theology of religions, the three-dimensional core of Christian faith – as it is expressed in the Trinitarian Creed – leads to the assumption that God represents himself salvifically not only in the proclamation of Jesus Christ as saviour but also in God's creative and inspiring spiritual power in the realm of the non-Christian religions. That does not curtail the belief that God is present in the proclamation of the

incarnated Logos. On the contrary: In that assumption the magnitude of God's universal will to salvation is expressed and glorified. The doctrine of the Trinity expresses the belief that the God who has revealed his unconditioned and universal will to salvation in Jesus Christ is the same God who rules over history and thus over the history of religions and again the same God who infuses the power of his spiritual presence in the hearts of all humans, trying to open them for the salvific presence of God.

### *Summary*

In the article, different approaches to apply the concept of the Trinity to the Theology of Religions are sketched and compared to each other: First, an ontological approach which assumes that traces of the trinity are to be found in the cosmos as a whole, in history, and thus in the history of religions, so that the basic experiences of the religious traditions can become integrated into a Trinitarian scheme. Second, a functionalist approach which sees the function of the doctrine of the Trinity in mediating between God's transcendence and the different modes of his immanence and asks for structural equivalents and functional analogies of that doctrine in other religions. A third approach is preferred to those two. In contrast to those it takes as its starting point the material content of the Christian doctrine of the Trinity and unfolds that content in a way which expresses God's universal presence among humankind, irrespective of religious affiliations.