

RESOURCES FOR A RESTORATION THEOLOGY OF RELIGIONS

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This essay has to do with the burgeoning field of Christian theologies of non-Christian religions.¹ I hope to put discussions of theologies of religions (and, to a lesser extent, comparative theology and interreligious dialogue) into conversation with the theologies of the Churches of Christ as I, as a lifelong member, understand them. I will argue that Churches of Christ have a number of theological resources from which to frame a rationale for, and structure the components of, a robust theology of religions—one that is unique as a Restoration tradition and that speaks to the larger Christian community.

In writing this essay to academic and church leaders from within the Stone-Campbell Movement (SCM), particularly Churches of Christ, I hope to accomplish three equally difficult (and admittedly lofty) tasks. The first task is simply to do theology, continuing the process of collective reflection in Churches of Christ about non-Christian religions.² My second, and most pressing, task has to do with laying the groundwork for that theological reflection. I will attempt to tease out the salient resources—theological foci and hermeneutical principles—already in use in the literature and thought of the SCM regarding non-Christian religions. My goal is to show that these resources provide a basis for future discussions.

¹By “Christian theology of religions” I mean a responsibly structured Christian approach to non-Christian religions and their practitioners. This is, for the most part, the consensus title given to an enormous body of literature (largely from the late 20th and early 21st c.). I will extrapolate from this term both the scaffold (using established foci and the language of Christian theological inquiry) and the scope (framing, in necessarily broad terms, an approach to the myriad religions of the world) of this essay. While scholars typically prefer more nuanced perspectives, there are three very general strands of theologies of religions: “exclusivism” (rejecting the validity of non-Christian religions), “inclusivism” (accepting elements of non-Christian religions), and “pluralism” (embracing non-Christian religions).

²In defining the theological agenda, I follow the lead of Paul Knitter. He argues that theology is “a mutually clarifying and mutually criticizing conversation between Christian experience and beliefs on the one side and ongoing human experience and understanding of self and the world on the other side.” See his “The Meeting of Religions: A Christian Debate,” in *Only One Way? Three Christian Responses to the Uniqueness of Christ in a Pluralistic World* (London: SCM Press, 2011), 47–48.

My third task is to elucidate the academically centered foundations of the second task by providing bibliographic support for theologians and ministers who are interested in taking these conversations further. The essay includes a summary of approaches to non-Christian religions from within each of the three main branches of the SCM. I sketch the most important resources each perspective provides, and I include reflections on the potential uses of these resources. I conclude by enumerating several other previously neglected resources that Churches of Christ might use in shaping a theology of religions. In this sense, this essay serves as a survey of, and introduction to, the literature of the field: in the body of the essay I deal mostly with the theologians writing from within the SCM; in the footnotes I offer supplementary bibliographic information, highlighting the thinkers from a variety of backgrounds whose views I think should have some bearing on our reflection.

The reality of globalization is nowhere more apparent than within the religious culture of the United States,³ and this affects Churches of Christ. The United States is home to some of the most diverse cities in the world, even in the South.⁴ Currently in the United States the populations of Jews (up to 6 million), Muslims (up to 4.5 million), and Buddhists (up to 4 million) are each more than twice that of Churches of Christ (up to 2 million). Churches of Christ, like many major Christian denominations, are shrinking in the United States.⁵ The news is not totally negative, as Christianity is growing in the global South—though in a number of highly religiously diverse places (specifically sub-Saharan Africa and India).⁶

It is becoming increasingly clear that interreligious cooperation (I would add as a precursor to that, theology of religions) will be one of the central imperatives facing Christianity in the twenty-first century. This rise in globalization and religious diversity has already given birth to new theological disciplines (for example, comparative theology⁷) and contexts (interfaith seminaries and

³Robert Wuthnow, *America and the Challenges of Religious Diversity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005); Diana Eck, *A New Religious America: How a "Christian Country" Has Now Become the World's Most Religiously Diverse Nation* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001).

⁴James C. Cobb, *Globalization and the American South* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2005). See also the fascinating statistics given by Frederick W. Norris regarding religious diversity in the Tri-Cities, TN in his "Religious Demographics and the New Diversity," in *The Oxford Handbook of Religious Diversity* (ed. Chad Meister; Oxford: OUP, 2011), 209–211.

⁵See the constantly updated statistics at <http://pluralism.org/resources/statistics/tradition.php>. Accessed 13 Dec. 2011. For information on Churches of Christ, see the American Religious Identification Survey (2008), available at: commons.trin.edu/aris/files/2011/08/ARIS_Report_2008.pdf. Accessed 13 Dec. 2011.

⁶Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (rev. & exp. ed.; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

⁷By way of defining "comparative theology," I turn to John Renard, "Comparative Theology: Definition and Method," *Religious Studies and Theology* 17:1 (1998): 5: "As a historical discipline, Comparative Theology investigates the mechanisms and assumptions behind both the implied and expressed comparisons that have resulted in theological change in a variety of historical and cultural contexts. As a systematic discipline, Comparative Theology builds on the historical data as it seeks to elaborate not only the relationships

community outreach programs). To complicate matters, many Evangelical communities (within which I include Churches of Christ⁸) have not outlined systematic theologies of religions. One might argue that Churches of Christ do have a *de facto* functional approach to all non-Christian religious Others: *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* (“outside the church there is no salvation”). This ideology often plays itself out with an implicit (therefore unevaluated) “soteriology of the unevangelized.”⁹ For reasons, however, that I hope will become clear below, it is time to reframe the discussion. It is time for a new theology of religions—one that is centered on the images, points of departure, and sensibilities that Churches of Christ bring to the table. My concern in this essay is not necessarily to encourage Churches of Christ to rethink our Christology or renounce our convictions; to the contrary, my argument is that we use those unique convictions as a springboard for reflection, dialogue, and constructive theology.

The Religious Other in Current Stone-Campbell Perspective

I will now develop a treatment of current Stone-Campbell literature by highlighting indicative perspectives on non-Christian religions from within the three branches of the SCM (Churches of Christ, Independent Christian Churches, and the Disciples of Christ). This is not an exhaustive bibliographic treatment; it is an attempt to synthesize the approaches that have been expounded within each branch and to extrapolate the resources those approaches provide for future reflection.

Perspectives from Churches of Christ

Several members of Churches of Christ have reflected on the issue of religious diversity, only two of whom have produced writing on the subject: Ed Mathews and Lee Camp.¹⁰ The two authors differ significantly in their ap-

between Christian and other theological systems, but the very shape of Christian theology itself. . . . It avoids polemics while nevertheless arriving at solid historical and systematic judgments about the dynamics of theological change.”

⁸See the convincing arguments in favor of including Churches of Christ in the Evangelical camp in Edward Myers, “Churches of Christ (A Cappella): Are We Evangelical?” in *Evangelicalism and The Stone-Campbell Movement* (vol 1.; ed. William R. Baker; Downers Grove, IN: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 50–67.

⁹I have borrowed this term from Amos Yong, *Beyond the Impasse: Toward a Pneumatological Theology of Religions* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003). I return to Yong in greater depth below.

¹⁰Three men who have not published their work also come to mind immediately. In an academic context, Dr. Stacy Patty, from Lubbock Christian University, has participated in the American Academy of Religion’s 2009–2010 Summer Seminar in the Theology of Religious Pluralism and Comparative Theology. Also, Dr. Lynn Mitchell, a professor of religion at the University of Houston, has presented numerous papers and lectures on interfaith matters. He has worked in interreligious contexts for nearly forty years: his work includes membership with the National Conference of Christians and Jews (including their Committee for Muslim-Christian Dialogue) and the Houston Interfaith Interjudiciary Forum. Finally, Dale Pauls, minister of the Stamford Church of Christ (Stamford, CT), has also been involved in interreligious dialogue for many years, having served as president of the Interfaith Council of Southwestern Connecticut (2006–2008); he has also led an interfaith reading group since 2007. Dr. Mitchell and Mr. Pauls both

proaches, yet they present two valuable resources for establishing a theology of religions: the imperative of Christian mission and the peacemaking implications of interreligious engagement.

Mathews published an essay entitled “Yahweh and the Gods: A Theology of World Religions from the Pentateuch” in 1995, making it perhaps the first treatment in print from among Churches of Christ regarding non-Christian religions (it was certainly the first to have engaged leading theologians of religions).¹¹ As implied in its title, though, Mathews’s main source for his theology is a reading of the Pentateuch; no other section of Scripture (or theological inquiry) informs his thesis. By accumulating a large selection of texts that bespeak the superiority of YHWH in comparison with other deities (Exod 8:10; 15:11; Deut 6:4), Mathews infers a theology of religions that is overtly exclusivistic: YHWH (reinterpreted through Christian understandings of God) is simply superior to all other deities, and pluralism is a serious challenge to that superiority. He argues that, “the qualitative difference between God and the gods, draws attention to his singular uniqueness, sets parameters to religious pluralism, and provides a basis for responding to the contemporary voices of religious tolerance.”¹²

I take issue with both Mathews’s theses and the presuppositions that undergird them, but I embrace the context from which he wrote. By virtue of the limitations of his study (the Pentateuch), he was forced to extrapolate and then radically reapply a theology of religions that is neither true to the entire Christian scriptural canon nor true to other parts of the HB. Also, his reading does not reflect a complete treatment of the text of the Pentateuch itself, given that he deals exclusively with the texts that employ the divine name of YHWH (a problematic image for such a thesis). He also largely neglects such pivotal considerations as holiness of the Gentile Melchizedek, and the clear literary and cultural connections between the Hebrew concept of YHWH and other Ancient Near Eastern deities.¹³ In short, he does not represent a critical reading of the text, and his hermeneutical and theological presuppositions render his exegesis largely unhelpful. But it is important to remember that his concern was primarily *missionological*, not exegetical or theological. I would, therefore, commend his essay as an attempt to take seriously the Christian concern for mission—particularly in contexts with great religious diversity. Mathews’s essay is a fine reminder of the sentiment that theologies of religions must be framed (at least partially) in terms of the mission of the Church.

The second theologian from Churches of Christ is Lee Camp, whose new book, *Who Is My Enemy?*¹⁴ deals with nonviolence and Christian/Muslim in-

read and responded to early drafts of this essay, and I acknowledge their insights and encouragement with gratitude.

¹¹In *Christianity and the Religions: A Biblical Theology of World Religions* (ed. Edward Rommen and Harold Netland; Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1995), 30–44.

¹²Mathews, “Yahweh and the Gods,” 35.

¹³Mathews does acknowledge that there are real issues for concern regarding the issue of “borrowing,” but largely disregards them as problems facing his thesis. Mathews, “Yahweh and the Gods,” 35.

¹⁴See Camp’s, *Who is My Enemy? Questions American Christians Must Face about*

teractions. This important book has much to say to our fragmented and tense world, particularly the post-9/11 West.¹⁵ Camp's work is both audience-specific (American Christians) and religion-specific (dealing exclusively with Islam). It has more to do with establishing a theological rationale for nonviolence than it does with establishing a theology of religions, or even a theology of Christian/Muslim engagement. Much of his book deals with implications and applications of the just-war tradition (JWT) in Christian history. In critiquing the JWT, Camp highlights the nonviolent foundations of earliest Christianity (and, many are proud to point out, the early Restoration Movement). Throughout his indicting book, Camp argues that (ironically) the history of Christian violence often more closely resembles Muslim concepts of war than the radical sense of peacemaking of Jesus and the early Christian Church.

While it is not his primary intent, Camp does present several arguments that seem quite fitting in this discussion of theologies of religions. First, Camp highlights the Christian imperative to love one's enemies—perhaps especially when such a person is perceived to be an enemy because of belonging to another religious tradition. Second, related to the first, Camp implies that with interreligious dialogue (something in which he also has often participated) Christians will fulfill that call to love our enemies. He says,

If Christian love calls us to the hard work of love of enemies, then that love of enemies surely requires, at least, that we listen to what the other is trying to say, requires that 'double vision' that seeks to put ourselves in the other's shoes. This does not justify the wrongs; it merely asks what we may need to learn about ourselves.¹⁶

As Camp implies, a profound sense of self-understanding comes with this dialogue. He also argues that certain theological foci (already present in Churches of Christ) would serve as fine points of entry into interreligious dialogue: confession of sin (neglecting the other, or violence in the name of religion) and baptism, for example.¹⁷ Although there will be elements of non-Christian religions that will certainly be untenable to Christians (such as Muslim rejection of the historicity of Jesus' crucifixion), there is a good deal that we may be able to learn from non-Christians.¹⁸ Camp argues convincingly that interactions between religious communities must be defined by peace and—more radically—hospitality.¹⁹ Perhaps this is what mission might look like in the United States of the future.

The Perspective of the Independent Christian Church/Churches of Christ

No scholar from within the Independent Christian Church has sought to articulate a systematic theology of religions, though Frederick W. Norris has

Islam—and Themselves (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2011).

¹⁵Camp also presented several relevant themes in his "Theological Ground for Peaceful Co-Existence," *ResQ* 49 (2007): 241–46.

¹⁶Camp, *Who Is My Enemy?* 98.

¹⁷Camp, "Theological Ground," 242.

¹⁸Camp, *Who Is My Enemy?* 130.

¹⁹Camp, "Theological Ground," 245–46.

reflected on both the issue of resources for a theology of religions²⁰ and Christian appropriations of pluralism.²¹ He articulates three resources that he sees already at work within the Stone-Campbell Movement²² that point to the reality of truth within other religious traditions: Scripture itself, the testimonies of missionaries, and the *consensus fidelium* (“the consent of the faithful”).

In enumerating his first resource, Norris briefly devotes his attention to texts in the Bible that could inform a theology of religions. He argues that “the Bible itself declares that important truth resides in other religions.”²³ Though a bit superficial for purposes of space, his discussion of biblical figures and themes is indicative of the potential for future inquiry. Norris (in contrast to Mathews) refers to the oft-cited Melchizedek and incorporates the fact that much of the Bible is dependent upon ancient Near Eastern literatures in his discussion. He argues that

Although the Bible criticizes false religions, it often indicates that God was already active in other cultures and religions in ways that should be honored; for those concerned with Christian mission, God’s work within those cultures and religions provides indigenous truth to be connected with the gospel of Jesus Christ.²⁴

As his second resource, Norris also notes the role of the experiences of missionaries—particularly those to non-Christian locales. He argues that many missionaries from within Christian Churches (and, could we add, Churches of Christ?) have seen “hints” of God’s activity within people of other religious traditions. He cites stories of missionaries to Africa who have heard people claim that they were sent by God to hear the message of Jesus. He begs the question as to whether the divine “does more in more places than many in our churches have dreamed.”²⁵

For his third resource, Norris turns his attention to a discussion of what he terms, following the lead of the twentieth-century theologian William Robinson, the *consensus fidelium*. With this term, he argues that an ecumenical ideological openness among many early church figures (he lists Tertullian and Justin Martyr) might provide a helpful springboard for reflection. He states, “I find a rather well-worked-out confession in early Christian documents which claims that Christianity does not have a corner on all truth but that ultimate truth and salvation are in Jesus Christ.”²⁶ As Churches of Christ receive his third resource, what is valuable is that he notes that models from the ancient world may well inform

²⁰See his “Theological Resources for Response to Pluralism from Christian Churches/Churches of Christ,” in *Grounds for Understanding: Ecumenical Resources for Response to Religious Pluralism* (ed. S. Mark Heim; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 107–21.

²¹Frederick W. Norris, “God and the Gods: Expect Footprints,” in *Unto the Uttermost: Missions in the Christian Churches/Churches of Christ* (ed. Doug Priest; Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1984), 55–69.

²²Hereinafter referred to as SCM.

²³Norris, “Theological Resources,” 107.

²⁴*Ibid.*, 108.

²⁵*Ibid.*, 109.

²⁶*Ibid.*, 110. Norris also cites several examples of ancient Christians who validated certain elements of non-Christian religions, including Gregory the Theologian (329–88 C.E.) and Timothy I, the eighth-century Nestorian patriarch of Baghdad.

a modern theology, particularly as the modern Independent Christian Church focuses on the eschatological vision and theological consensus of the church.²⁷

Unfortunately, Norris does not develop his resources into a coherent theology, and his dissatisfaction with the trifold (exclusivist, inclusivist, pluralist) divide leaves the reader ambivalent as to how he sees the discussion progressing. He concludes with an admonition, though, that “Foundational Religious Pluralism”—the position embracing all religious traditions, which I will develop more below—is untenable for the Independent Christian Church due to their traditional christological convictions.

The Perspective of the Disciples of Christ

The Disciples of Christ have produced the only denominational document on pluralism from within the SCM: “Disciples of Christ and Interreligious Engagement” (2006).²⁸ Here, in a set of thirty-seven principles, the Council on Christian Unity set forth a manifesto for interreligious engagement. This Council builds its argument for engaging the religious Other upon the theological commitments and identity of the Disciples, embracing God’s inclusive nature and respecting the *imago Dei* within all people. It calls for more intentionality regarding the witness of the Disciples in the form of interfaith dialogue and social action. The Council argues (on many of the same grounds as Camp) that not only will such interaction benefit the Disciples engaged within it, practitioners will be participating in seeking the good for those thought to be our enemies—which surely reflects the Christ story in profound ways (Luke 6:27). Regarding resources (which the Council terms “gifts”), this document sees within Disciples theology two elements already addressed in Camp (the call to continued learning) and Norris (biblical primacy). The Council also enumerates several other resources worth considering: an emphasis on God’s redemptive work, the call for Christian unity, and the sacramental nature of Disciples theology (specifically the inclusive Lord’s Supper) as a call to welcoming the religious Other.

Other Disciples are working in the area of theologies of religions. In an essay from 2008, Don A. Pittman outlines the theology of religions that he thinks the Disciples will adopt in the coming decades: pluralism, specifically the eco-liberationist pluralism of Paul Knitter.²⁹ He begins his essay by arguing that the relationship of Christians to non-Christian religious Others is one of Christianity’s “most important and difficult questions.”³⁰ Pittman sees a duality in Disciples theology: on the one hand, the Disciples maintain (as all SCM traditions maintain) the centrality of Christ in theology; on the other hand, the Disciples believe in a “dialogical approach to truth.”³¹ In defending his move to pluralism, Pittman

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 117.

²⁸ This brief document is available for download at <http://www.disciples.org/ccu/PDF/Disciples%20of%20Christ%20and%20Interreligious%20Engagement.pdf>. Accessed 20 July 2012.

²⁹ Don A. Pittman, “Toward a Disciples Theology of Religions,” in *Chalice Introduction to Disciples Theology*, ed. Peter Goodwin Heltzel (St. Louis: Chalice, 2008), 305–13.

³⁰ Pittman, 305.

³¹ *Ibid.*

argues that many twenty-first-century Disciples are increasingly uncomfortable with exclusivism (that of Mathews and Norris, for example) for two reasons: the biblical witness and the tensions of theodicy. This is particularly true, he argues, with regard to Judaism.³² He takes for granted that many Disciples have embraced inclusivism and seeks to chart a pluralistic path in light of that. He turns to (an implicit reading of) the Bible (1 Tim 2:4), noting that many Disciples see “the operation of the healing grace of God everywhere, including in and through non-Christian traditions,”³³ and that they are becoming uncomfortable with inclusivism because “the criterion for judging truth claims is given *a priori*.”³⁴ Pittman says,

I want to advocate rather a form of theological pluralism that is faithful to the gospel, productive of a spirit of mutuality between persons of different faith traditions, and credible to mainstream Disciples of Christ. . . . [O]ur knowledge of the Absolute is always conditioned and partial; that persons in all religious traditions may through dialogue with one another learn something new to all of them; and that there *may* be multiple paths to salvation, to right relations with God and neighbor, *precisely because* we know there is, in fact, one path given in Christ. It is a position that not only provides for a missional goal in dialogue, as we listen to others and share our own faith, but, in not prejudging the value of non-Christian religions, establishes the kind of respectful forum of equals that facilitates such conversation. Strategically speaking, the dialogue envisioned will proceed most effectively, as Paul Knitter has suggested, with a primary focus on *suffering* (e.g., dimensions of poverty, victimization, violence, and patriarchy) and the resources that all persons can bring to bear on the world’s pressing eco-justice concerns.³⁵

He then names a threefold focus:

In view of our restoration theme, we will eagerly want to reflect on the long history of God’s interaction with all of God’s children, both inside and outside the church. In harmony with the Disciples’ ecumenical theme, we will confirm our belief in Christian unity and our oneness with all people, which justifies the Council on Christian Unity’s concern with interreligious engagement. In light of our eschatological theme, we will confidently confess that God is with us always as we struggle to perceive and join faithfully in God’s saving work.³⁶

Significant for purposes of this essay, though, is his advocacy that the Disciples use dialogue as the means by which to adjudicate truth. Pittman’s main concern has to do with approaching the table of dialogue in an open manner that facilitates genuine exchange. He claims that genuine (acceptable) dialogue is defined by four criteria: rationality, inclusivity, relationality, and creativity.³⁷

³²Due to limitations of space, I have neglected the narrowly focused work of Clark Williamson, who is the Indiana Professor of Christian Thought Emeritus at Christian Theological Seminary. Williamson’s related scholarship also has to do with Jewish-Christian dialogue and Christian theologies of Judaism. For an introduction to his work, see his *A Guest in the House of Israel: Post-Holocaust Church Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1993).

³³Pittman, 309.

³⁴Ibid.

³⁵Ibid., 311.

³⁶Ibid., 311.

³⁷Ibid., 312.

In sum, while the Disciples have proposed a theological position that will clearly be at odds with the other two branches of the SCM, they have provided a number of resources that, when extrapolated, should speak meaningfully—even to those not willing to embrace pluralism. First, the Disciples bring the issue of sacrament to the discussion, arguing that the sacramental theologies of the SCM offer an avenue through which to approach the religious Other. Second, and in keeping with Camp, the Disciples see dialogue not only as a means by which to enact reconciliation, but as an epistemic source—and as a means by which God may speak. The Disciples (alongside Knitter) remind the SCM of the importance of bringing justice (not only peacemaking) to bear in framing a theology of religions.

Evaluation of Stone-Campbell Perspectives

Several of the points enumerated above are relevant to the Churches of Christ. First, there is the validation of many elements of interreligious engagement (some would argue validation of the religious Other) in the Bible itself. All of the scholars noted here have relied upon Scripture in shaping and applying their arguments. Norris's work, for example, is a call that perhaps it is time to ask new questions of the Bible—seeking to discern our understanding of the claim (inferred from some biblical texts) that there is truth in other religious traditions. In fact, many biblical scholars already have begun to do so,³⁸ but none from within Churches of Christ. Perhaps the first place to begin this inquiry would be the NT, or the canon-within-the-canon of the Churches of Christ: “Hebrews, the Pastoral Epistles, and Acts.”³⁹ On first consideration, a call to reread the NT might seem counterintuitive. There is, however, an abundance of insight within the NT, particularly in Acts, on both the interreligious question and, perhaps especially, on the theme of hospitality.⁴⁰

Second, the issue of revelation is a central, though undefined, thread running through the thought of the SCM theologians. Pittman, for example, says, “Jesus was, we proclaim, decisively disclosive of the Ultimate, though we have never claimed that the Ultimate was totally disclosed.”⁴¹ Many within the SCM are not willing to rethink central issues such as Christology, though they may well be ready to investigate the process of revelation. While the issue of revelation is central to some theologians of religions,⁴² many (particularly Evangelical)

³⁸ Relevant resources include Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *An Introduction to the Theology of Religions: Biblical, Historical, and Contemporary Perspectives*, 33–51; Wesley Ariarajah, *The Bible and People of Other Faiths* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1985; repr. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2009); Ida Glaser, *The Bible and Other Faiths: What Does the Lord Require of Us?* (Leicester: IVP, 2005); W. Eugene March, *God's Tapestry: Reading the Bible in a World of Religious Diversity* (Louisville: WJK, 2009).

³⁹ James W. Thompson, “What Is Church of Christ Scholarship?” *ResQ* 49 (2007): 36.

⁴⁰ See the Amos Yong, *Hospitality and the Other: Pentecost, Christian Practices, and the Neighbor* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2008), esp. chs. 2 and 4.

⁴¹ Pittman, 313.

⁴² See, specifically, Gerald R. McDermott, *Can Evangelicals Learn from Other Religions? Jesus, Revelation and Religious Traditions* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press,

scholars do not make it a cornerstone to their theologies. This omission, however, is distressing, particularly to those in the Restoration tradition. The NT does not represent all of the early Christian witness, and the affirming voices of many within early Christianity of the truth in other religions provides another starting point from which to begin a new discussion. This is certainly not to say that early Christian communities were pluralistic (or even necessarily “inclusivist”) in the modern sense. These communities validated aspects of traditions not their own. Problematically, there has been little scholarly attention (again, particularly among Evangelicals) paid to the process of discerning exactly what the early Christian communities validated and why.⁴³

Third, soteriology has not arisen in these writings. The soteriological question has long puzzled theologians of religions, and discussions of it are obviously sensitive. Many place an ideological “bracket” around the discussion, avoiding it to explore other theological aims. However, a treatment of soteriology may well be another avenue through which fruitful theology may arise: for example, a scholarly exercise that compares biblical soteriologies with notions of salvation in non-Christian traditions would be quite helpful. Some scholars are broaching the topic of soteriology as it relates to theologies of religions, but many questions are still facing the Christian community.⁴⁴

Fourth, I would argue that this discussion of theologies of religions may point to a larger truth: thinking through issues of religious pluralism could very well be another issue over which those of us from the fractured SCM can unite. While it is clear even from this cursory treatment of SCM theologies that the three branches have different sensibilities and presuppositions (and may well reach different conclusions), the process of communal reflection on this monumental issue may provide a context for genuine collaboration.

My fifth point will serve as a transition into the next section of this essay. What is most striking in the resources enumerated above is that there is nothing unique to the SCM within them; that is, until this point there is little that separates these theological resources from those employed by other Evangelical communities. If the SCM has unique theological foci and we think that those foci should speak to the larger theological community, then our theologies—including this theology of religions—must be centered on resources that are at least partially unique to the SCM.

2000); and Herald A. Netland, *Dissonant Voices: Religious Pluralism and the Question of Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991).

⁴³That is not to say that there has been no reflection among Evangelicals. For a notable exception, see the brief, but helpful historical surveys in John Sanders, *No Other Name: An Investigation into the Destiny of the Unevangelized* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991). Sanders carefully portrays the diversity of opinion within many early Christian communities, rendering invalid any monolithic interpretation of early Christian perspectives.

⁴⁴I am thinking specifically of the American Baptist theologian S. Mark Heim, whose creative work has opened new possibilities for interreligious engagement. See his *Salvations: Truth and Difference in Religion* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1995); also his *The Depth of Riches: A Trinitarian Theology of Religious Ends* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001). I am indebted to Dale Pauls for his reflection on soteriology as a potential entry point.

Further Resources: A Constructive Proposal

There are three more unrealized theological resources from within Churches of Christ that would make for a uniquely grounded theology of religions. This is a modest proposal, a conversation piece, toward rethinking (or returning to) our theology. Speaking very generally about the need for more robust theologies of religions for and from Evangelicals, Gordon Smith argues, “We need new language, new categories, so that we can read Scripture effectively and be able to simultaneously hold the uniqueness of Christ together with the reality of truth within non-Christian religions.”⁴⁵ I propose three terms that I think are particularly pregnant with possibilities in answer to Gordon’s call for “new language” for Churches of Christ: restoration, Spirit, and church. Each of these resources is a unique contribution that the SCM (particularly the Churches of Christ) brings to the table.

Restoration: A Plea for Theological Inquiry

For my first point—the one that, generally speaking, I hope to show has great potential for carving out a unique theology of religions—I would like to focus on that which has been a part of the communal identity of Churches of Christ for nearly two centuries: the plea for the restoration of earliest Christianity. How did the earliest Christian communities think of the religious Other, and how might that provide a framework within which to address the issue of religious diversity in the world today? The early Christian communities were certainly not strangers to varying religious customs (an indictment I would apply to many American Evangelicals). Perhaps their questions, language, and stance can illuminate a new (or very old) way of framing the issue of religious pluralism.

Understanding the nature of the christological question for the early church is significant for this issue. Given that Christianity emerged over a considerable period of time, like rabbinic Judaism, from biblical Israel, there is within early Christianity a willingness to rethink the core nature of being the people of God—expanding the boundaries (or at least conversation partners) beyond the confines of ethnic Israel and its cultic forms.⁴⁶ Paul, for example, is informative here, as his writings are often an attempt to reframe Jewish identity in light of the experiences he and his communities have had with Christ. Perhaps this attitude of openness is the healthiest element of early Christian ideology. Could it not also be that which the SCM is now to restore? Might Churches of Christ reflect a willingness to reclaim the “new wineskins” approach to theological certainty? What if Churches of Christ saw early Christian reflection on Jesus as a challenge to press on in inquiry instead of an end result?

By welcoming the polyphony of early Christian perspectives to the table, the SCM would be readily embracing and appropriating Norris’s concept of the role of *consensus fidelium*. By considering the inclusive and liberative spirit of

⁴⁵Gordon T. Smith, “Religions and the Bible: An Agenda for Evangelicals,” in *Christianity and the Religions: A Biblical Theology of World Religions* (ed. Edward Rommen and Harold Netland, Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1995), 16.

⁴⁶I am indebted to Dr. Mary C. Boys for her insight on this issue.

early Christianity, we would be acting on Pittman's call to justice. By engaging in dialogue with the religious Other in the manner of the early church, we would be applying Camp's call to peacemaking in concrete ways. Restoration has already infiltrated the theological questions posed thus far. Perhaps it is now time to expand such inquiry.

Spirit: The Open Pneumatology of Churches of Christ

Issues related to the Holy Spirit have long been problematic for Churches of Christ. Throughout our brief history, there has been very little consensus on the role that the Holy Spirit plays in the church⁴⁷—much less in the world. However, this lack of consensus could serve us well as we attempt to articulate a theology of religions. Simply put, given our lack of an “official” position on pneumatology, there is room for exploration within the confines of our traditions. Effectively, our openness on this issue allows us to glean points of departure from pneumatologically minded theologians of religions, such as Clark Pinnock and Amos Yong.

The work of Canadian Baptist Clark Pinnock centers on the biblical text (particularly the HB)—especially to the way that God interacted with those outside the fold of Israel. His theses are highly nuanced, and summarizing them thoroughly is outside the scope of this essay.⁴⁸ More briefly, his approach to the role and function of the Holy Spirit is significant. Pinnock argues that the Holy Spirit is alive and working in various non-Christian faith communities, often opening the way for the message of Jesus. He sees this as “modal” inclusivism, one that allows God opportunities to work salvifically through other religions, but does not oblige God to do so universally.⁴⁹ While noting that salvation comes through Christ alone, he concedes that “Christians do not have a monopoly on the Spirit, and the Spirit is not tied to our apron strings.”⁵⁰

Perhaps more important, especially for the SCM, is the creative pneumatology of the Pentecostal theologian Amos Yong. Yong has published numerous articles and books on the subject, attempting to create what he calls a “pneumatological theology of religions.” In responding to the particularistic concerns of the Evangelical community, but taking a softer position than those within the pluralistic

⁴⁷ See the lengthy exposition of SCM pneumatology by Byron C. Lambert, “Holy Spirit, Doctrine of the,” in *The Stone-Campbell Encyclopedia* (ed. Douglas A. Foster, Paul M. Blowers, Anthony L. Dunnivant and D. Newell Williams; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 403–6; see also the cursory history of the pneumatologies of various SCM figures in Douglas A. Foster, “Waves of the Spirit against a Rational Rock: The Impact of the Pentecostal, Charismatic, and Third Wave Movements on American Churches of Christ,” *ResQ* 45 (2003): 99–110.

⁴⁸ For a more thorough treatment of Pinnock's pneumatology, see his *The Flame of Love: A Theology of the Holy Spirit* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1996); for a general sense of his theology of religions, see also his *A Wideness in God's Mercy: The Finality of Jesus in a World of Religions* (Grand Rapids: Zonderan, 1992).

⁴⁹ For more on this, see his contribution to *Four Views on Salvation in a Pluralistic World* (ed. Dennis L. Okholm and Timothy R. Phillips; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), specifically 98–100.

⁵⁰ Pinnock, *Four Views*, 105.

circles, he persuasively argues that “pneumatology is the key to overcoming the dualism between christological particularity and the cosmic Christ.”⁵¹ Yong’s first major work on the subject, *Beyond the Impasse*,⁵² sought to lay the groundwork for thinking pneumatologically about the religious Other. His thesis is based upon three axioms: 1. “God is universally present and active in the Spirit”; 2. “God’s Spirit is the life-breath of the imago Dei in every human being and the presupposition of all human relationships and communities”; 3. “The religions of the world, like everything else that exists, are providentially sustained by the Spirit of God for divine purposes.”⁵³ To be sure, Yong’s theses have their challenges for readers from Churches of Christ. Also, given his openly Pentecostal confession, he is much more willing to accept certain charismatic expressions that will likely not find a welcoming audience in a rationalistic fellowship such as Churches of Christ.⁵⁴ His theses challenge the SCM to articulate how it will go about recognizing what is and is not pneumatologically acceptable for a theology of religions. Consideration of Pinnock, Yong, and other likeminded theologians can guide the SCM in expanding upon previous theological inquiry and chart new theological territory for us.

Church: Communities for Discernment and Hospitality

My last potential resource, that of ecclesiology, is the most speculative—but I think it may have substantial promise. It comes from the general observation that ecclesiological considerations have long been the dominant theological lens of Churches of Christ.⁵⁵ Many of the systematic theologies by and for the Churches of Christ are ecclesiologies.⁵⁶ Perhaps Churches of Christ could use these ecclesiological conversations as a springboard for framing a theology of religions. For example, a deep desire to learn about God—not only to be missional within the world—is a central component to any robust ecclesiology; this “hoping to learn” may well play itself out in interreligious contexts.⁵⁷ In so doing the SCM would take up one of the most neglected areas in the literature of theologies of religions: the communities for which they are created. Whereas we have seen that many theologians of religions focus on the impasse of Christology, the functions of pneumatological approaches, or the nature of interreligious justice, the area of community is too often neglected. There is a small (but growing) body

⁵¹ Amos Yong, *Beyond the Impasse: Toward a Pneumatological Theology of Religions* (Grand Rapids: Paternoster, 2003), 47.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ Yong, *Beyond the Impasse*, 44–46. Emphases his.

⁵⁴ Foster, “Waves of the Spirit against a Rational Rock.”

⁵⁵ Thompson, “What Is Church of Christ Scholarship?” 36.

⁵⁶ Cf. Everett Ferguson’s *The Church of Christ: A Biblical Ecclesiology for Today* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996); and the chapters on ecclesiology (11–14) by Everett Ferguson, Gary Holloway, Robert Lowery, and Stanley Grenz in *Evangelicalism and the Stone-Campbell Movement* (vol. 1; ed. William R. Baker; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002).

⁵⁷ See Kenneth Wilson, “Hoping to Learn: An Approach to Ecclesiology,” in *Church and Religious ‘Other’* (ed. Gerard Mannion; London: T&T Clark, 2008), 273.

of literature on ecclesiology and theologies of religions,⁵⁸ but the topic is largely left untouched by Evangelicals. This is unfortunate because an ecclesio-logically centered focus would be beneficial to all theologians for whom communal identity is important.

As a potential framework, I would like to propose that Churches of Christ might understand churches as communities for discernment and hospitality. This would necessarily imply that the entire church—not just the academic communities—would be responsible for participating in the articulation of a theology of religions. It is within the boundaries of church that our theologies are embodied, so the church should have a voice in crafting those theologies. Our church communities are also concrete contexts for real and meaningful hospitality—potentially to the religious Other. This is already taking place in Churches of Christ, but its interreligious implications have yet to be fully realized. As we have seen, the theme of hospitality is already present in the theologies of the SCM. Of all of the theological resources I am proposing here, this resource has perhaps the greatest potential to speak meaningfully to nonacademics: a high view of what it means to be “church” or “the family of God” may well be one of the strongest links within Churches of Christ between church and academy.

A Summary and Conclusion

What theological resources does the SCM, particularly the Churches of Christ, have at its disposal as we begin collectively thinking about articulating a theology of religions? This theology must speak meaningfully both to churches (reflecting their theological concerns, reservations, and uncertainties) and to the greater theologically diverse society—the modern world. First is the resource of mission. This focal image bolsters the importance of interreligious engagement, even as the boundaries of mission are unclear: could it be that cooperation is as much an element of mission today as conversion? Second, within the SCM are theologies reminding us of the importance of peacemaking and reconciliation, not only as a means of political engagement but, more importantly, as a means of being true to the ethics of Christ. Third is the surprising resource of the Bible, in which the diversity of expression calls for further reflection. Fourth is the testimony of missionaries, many of whom have witnessed what may well be God working outside the boundaries of Christianity. Fifth is the early Christian community. This diverse community and its leaders often understood their religiously diverse worlds in affirmative ways. Sixth is a diverse chorus of voices within the SCM that is looking for alternative methods by which to conceive of the religious Other—being true to our Christian traditions (particularly the sacraments), and

⁵⁸See, for example, the work of Gerard Mannion, *Church and Religious ‘Other’* and *Comparative Ecclesiology*, both of which were part of the Ecclesiological Investigations series (London: T&T Clark, 2008). In the former volume, the contributors take up the issue of the nature of inclusive ecclesiologies, posing questions to established systematic theologies about how the church might embrace the religious Other. In the latter volume, Mannion’s concern has more to do with the thought of Roger Haight, whose own work in historical ecclesiology has been influential (and open for expansion) in recent years.

allowing other religions to have a respected voice. Seventh, many within the SCM see dialogue as a means by which to seek and appropriate truth.

I would add that we have three further resources that have, as of yet, been neglected in reflection from among the SCM. First, Churches of Christ have a restoration plea—albeit an undefined (and often critiqued) one—that would enable us to formulate new questions and categories based on the combination of historical inquiry and constructive theology. Second, Churches of Christ embody a diversity of pneumatologies. This openness leaves us with the opportunity to embrace many of the insights of the theologians whose work centers around the role of the Spirit. Third, Churches of Christ have a high ecclesiology, which has historically served as a theological focal point in many of our discussions, and may allow us an entry point into the field of interreligious engagement.

I offer a few general and practical suggestions. My first general suggestion is that Churches of Christ might also center a theology of religions on the theme of revelation—perhaps in addition to considerations of Christology, soteriology, or ecclesiology. A focus on revelation would allow Churches of Christ to be true to our commitment to the Bible and would open doors for examining the epistemology of religion—something in which there is growing interest in our fellowship. While there have been a few Evangelical scholars who have broached the topic of revelation in depth, a good deal of work is still to be done. My second, and most salient, general suggestion is that Churches of Christ hold firm to their confessional ideals, welcoming insight from other religions and other Christian theologians of religions—but maintaining their commitment to Christ and his church. This discussion need not do away with a commitment to evangelism, for example. To the contrary, more and sustained interaction with non-Christians will naturally lead to sharing convictions about Christ and the church.

Regarding practicalities and in keeping with my goal that this essay serve as the beginning of a conversation rather than its end, I propose first (and broadly) that it is time for more members of the Churches of Christ to begin the process of reflecting and writing on the issue of theologies of religions. This conversation should include academics, church leaders, and those already involved in interreligious engagement. It may be time for a panel session on this issue at one of our ministry or academic conferences. Second, I propose a shift in education. We should be offering more classes on non-Christian religions (dare I suggest they be taught by practitioners of those faiths?), comparative theology, and theologies of religions in our seminaries and graduate schools. These trends of globalization must be reflected in Christian scholarship.⁵⁹ This area of inquiry is too foundational for the future of theology to be largely absent from our institutions of higher education. Fourth, and most important, I propose that we begin the often-frightening process of actually befriending the religious Other, creating and sustaining relationships with those whom it may be difficult to befriend. Perhaps we will be surprised by what we learn about God and ourselves in the process.

⁵⁹Everett W. Huffard, "When Scholarship Goes South: Biblical Scholarship and Global Trends," *ResQ* 48 (2006): 70.