

CONFLICT PARADIGM FOR THEOLOGY OF RELIGIONS

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I. Introduction

In the early 1990s, the renowned missiologist David Bosch observed that “the revival religion is not only a Christian phenomenon. On the contrary, it would seem that it is especially the other religions that are experiencing revitalization.”¹ According to <http://www.religioustolerance.org>, a website promoting religious tolerance rather than just one religion, “though Christianity ranks number one in its followers, the followers of Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism are also rapidly climbing. Hinduism has grown to become the world’s third largest religion, after Christianity and Islam. It claims about 837 million followers - 13% of the world’s population. It is the dominant religion in India, Nepal, and among the Tamils in Sri Lanka.” The site also says that “the Hare Krishna Movement, a contextualized Western version of a form of Hinduism, single-handedly started by an Indian guru, Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada in the middle 1960s in New York, now has a stable membership of over one million members worldwide;”² (The writer of this paper was once a full-time devotee from 1989-1993 in China before converting to the Christian faith in 1994. The membership then was less than 200,000 worldwide.)

¹ David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1991), 476.

² <http://www.religioustolerance.org/hare.htm>, accessed May 28, 2008.

Christian churches of today are faced with totally unprecedented challenges. Bosch wrote, “It would probably be correct to say that we have reached the point where there can be little doubt that the two largest unsolved problems for the Christian church are its relationship (1) to world views which offer this-worldly salvation, and to other faiths.” Sharpe believes it is the *theologia religionum* which is the epitome of mission theology.³

Hesselgrave observed “few subjects are fraught with a higher degree of passion on the one hand, and a greater diversity of opinions on the other.” However, “open discussions often generate more heat than light. Scholarly dialogue easily become mired in minutiae and often yield little that is conclusive or helpful.”⁴

This study is an attempt to participate in the ongoing open discussion. It seeks to tackle the pressing challenges of world religions on Christianity in the framework of the cosmic conflict paradigm.

II. Definitions of key terms

Cosmic Conflict—In this study, the cosmic conflict refers to the great controversy between good and evil from the inception of sin in the heart of Lucifer and his rebellion with his angels in heaven to the fall of man in the garden of Eden all the way to the final eradication of sin from God’s created cosmos.

Religion: In this study, the term religion is served for religion derived from the revelation of God’s word, the Bible.

Religions: I use this term to refer to all other religions which are not based on the revealed word of God in the Bible.

Traditional Religions/ New Religions: I concur with Hesselgrave that “there is nothing new under the sun” (Eccl. 1:9). New religions are not really new, however, “these religious movements nevertheless manifest new points of departure in terms of emergent leadership, unusual happenings, unique emphases, and zeal.”⁵

III. Theories of the Origin of Religion

“How is it that we have a religion?” asked Max Muller in the opening of his lecture on the origin and growth of religion. “This is a question which has not been asked for the first time in theses latter days, but it is nevertheless, a question which sounds startling even to ears that have been hardened by the din of

³ Bosch, 476-477.

⁴ David J. Hesselgrave, *Traditional Religions, New Religions, and the Communication of the Christian Faith in Encountering New Religious Movements*, edited by Irving Hexham, Stephen Rost and John W. Morehead II (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2004), 137.

⁵ Hesselgrave, 140.

many battles, fought for the conquest of truth... Why we believe, why we are, or imagine we are conscious of things which we can neither perceive with our sense, nor conceive with our reason—a question, it would seem more natural to ask than any other—has but seldom received, even from the greatest philosophers, that attention which it seems so fully to deserve.”⁶

Some answers came with the great progress made in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in the development of anthropology, history, psychology and sociology with regard to religious phenomena. Many scholars gave a great deal of attention to religion because they found that religion played a significant role in the various societies which they studied. It became clear to them that any account of how a society was formed and operated was incomplete unless they had some knowledge of the place of religion in the society. A common feature in these approaches was the interest in the “origin” of religion. Those who do not believe in the Supreme Being, divinities or in the supernatural realm have been diligent to offer a naturalistic explanation for all religion. Evolution was the framework for them to explain a natural development of religion.

Without going to details, we will just name some of these man’s theories for the origin of religion and those associated with them.

- Fetishism. Charles de Brosses in 1760 contended that religion originated in fetishism, the worship of inanimate things and of animals. Auguste Comte, used the term, fetishism, to refer to a general theory of religion and theorized that religion evolved from fetishism to polytheism and finally monotheism.
- Dream Theory. Edward Tylor coined the word, “animism.” In Tylor’s opinion, the belief in spirits and gods arose from man’s experience of dreams, visions, disease and death. Tylor thought that religion began with animism, and evolved into polytheism. Finally, polytheism evolved into monotheism.
- Monotheistic Theory. Andrew Lang was a student of Edward Tylor who suggested that belief in a creative, moral, omnipotent and omniscient God probably arose among “primitive people” from observing the design of the universe. He claimed that monotheism may even have precede animism since belief in a Creator God is found among most “primitive” peoples all over the world.
- Magico-Religious Theory. This theory says that magic must have preceded religion because religion (belief in spiritual beings) is too advanced for “primitive” people evolving from primate creatures. The first step in the evolutionary development of religion must have been magic. Sir James Frazer, suggested three stages of development in his book *The Golden*

⁶ F. Max Muller, M.A., Lectures on Origin and Growth of Religion As Illustrated by The Religions of India. (London, Longmans, Green, and Co., 1878), B.

Bough: magic, religion and science.

- Psychoanalytic Theory. This is the theory of Sigmund Freud who constructed a myth to explain the origin of religion. It is based on the Oedipus complex. Religion is the result of psychological tensions, frustrations and illusions.
- Sociological Theories. This is the view of Karl Marx who rejects all religions. He calls religion “the opium of the people.”⁷

IV. Approaches to the Study of Religion

It seems logical to give a definition for religion before moving on to discuss different approaches to the study of religion. However, that is not a easy task. Terry C. Muck writes,

“Religion is a word/concept that attempts to cover a type of human experience as it relates to a transcendent reality. Religion is a familiar word that communicates a commonly recognized content. But for all its familiarity, it is a difficult word to define.”⁸

Muck says that “‘Religion’ is an attempt to bring under one broad umbrella an incredible diversity of religious ideas and practices.”⁹ It is suggested that “fundamental to arriving at a practical answer is to see the difference between viewing religion as a “thing” and viewing it as a “word.”¹⁰

To view religion as a “thing” assumes religion exists of its own in the world, virtually having a life of its own. Questions about the origin and the future of religion are important in this view. To view religion as a “word” refer to “something which all persons can investigate if they take the time and pains to do so.”¹¹

Robert D. Baird proposes that scholars give up the fruitless search for a definition of the “thing” religion. He argues that definitions should be of words and proposes the following functional definition of religion: “Religion is that which is of ultimate or supreme concern to individuals or groups.”¹² With this definition, two broad questions are raised to understand a religion:

⁷ This section of discussion is a summary from two books on the origin of religions: J.N.K. Mugambi, *A Comparative Study of Religions* (Nairobi: Nairobi University Press,1993), 11-15. Richard J. Gehman, *African Traditional Religion* (Nairobi: East African Educational Publisher Ltd, 1989), 32-39.

⁸ Terry C. Muck, “Religion” in *Evangelical Dictionary of World Missions*, edited by A. Scott Moreau, Harold Netland and Charles Van Engen, (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000), 818-819.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 819.

¹⁰ James F. Lewis and William G. Travis, *Religious Traditions of the World* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1991), 21.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 22.

¹² Quoted by James F. Lewis and William G. Travis, *Religious Traditions of the World* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1991), 23.

- What problem or problems about the human condition are implied in the ultimate concerns of persons and groups?
- By what means and methods are the problems resolved?¹³

For practical purpose, my working definition of religion for this paper is an adaptation of this definition, except it changes human dimension to cosmic dimension. As it stands, “Religion is that which is of ultimate or supreme concern to individual beings (Beings) or groups based on divine revelation as recorded in the Bible. All others fall into the category of “religions.” My emphasis here is not so much to define what religion is or is not, but to differentiate the religion of Christ as revealed in the Bible and all other religions.

Due to the complicated nature of the phenomena of religion, different approaches have been suggested. My discussion is mainly from the work of James F. Lewis.

1. The personalist approach as represented by W.C. Smith, it asks the question, what do the followers of this religion or religions community believe to be true?
2. The structuralism of Hans Penner. He does not seek primarily to discover the meaning of the ritual to the participants, but ask questions like, what does the behavior mean and what does the language mean? In other word, the hidden structure as understood by the structuralist.
3. The most widely accepted approach to religion by sociologists and anthropologists is functionalism. The functionalism of Emile Durkheim asks the question, what role does religion play in the life of society as a whole? Functionalism explains religion by reference to its value for society: how it serves to discipline individualism, bind individuals together into social units, and preserve and transmit the traditions which give individuals identity and cohesion.
4. The normative approach of Hendrik Kraemer is the most practiced way of most theologians and some philosophers. It asks the question: are the beliefs of this religion true?
5. History of religions approach of Robert Baird: Does the object and method of religious study rest on historical grounds? This approach begins with a definition of religion that limits the object of study to the historical realm. Proceeding on these grounds it describes and explains what persons and groups consider of supreme or ultimate importance. Humanity’s religious experience is so varied and rich that the application of these methods by sensitive and skilled observers leads to informative results.¹⁴

Each approach above has its own strength and weakness. All seem to have one thing in common: there is no standard in each approach on which one can rely to decide what is good and what is evil in a given religion.

¹³ Ibid., 26.

¹⁴ Ibid., 28-47.

V. Contemporary Theologies of Religion

The plurality of religions and cultures has been an integral feature of life within the human community since time immemorial. Today, Christian churches are encountering this reality not only in Oriental countries, but in Western countries as well. Alan Race attributes this sudden surge of interest in the issue, to three major reasons. Firstly, the changing patterns of mobility have shattered older conceptions of the religious history of the world, which viewed the faiths as being largely confined to specific cultural and geographical boundaries. Secondly, at an academic level, there has been an accumulation of a wealth of knowledge concerning the beliefs and practices of non-Christian faiths. Finally, there seems to be a new missionary consciousness that a number of ancient faiths are manifesting throughout the world.¹⁵

- What should be our attitude as Christians to the diverse faiths of our neighbors in our society in which we live?
- Is it right for Christians to continue to hold to the conviction that Jesus Christ is the only way to God—the only mediator between God and man?
- If Jesus is the only Savior, what about the millions of people who lived before Jesus was born?
- If Jesus is the Lord, does it mean Supreme Venerable Sovereign (太上老君), Buddha, Krishna or others are not?

The responses of Christian community to these questions fall into three categories; or in other words, there are generally three contemporary theologies of religion: the pluralism of John Hick, the inclusivism of Karl Rahner and the exclusivism of Lesslie Newbigin. Charles Van Engen notices by 1992 this three-part typology had become common currency among evangelicals.¹⁶ There are different proposals trying to establishing the forth theology of religion among evangelical circles.¹⁷

John Hick is the representative of religious pluralism. In 1973 Hick called for a paradigm shift in thinking about religion in his book *God and the Universe of Faiths*. He suggested that each of world's religions should be viewed as "different human responses to one divine Reality. . ."¹⁸ The fullest development of Hick's views can be found in *An Interpretation of Religion* published fifteen years later. In *An Interpretation of Religion* Hick presents a comprehensive theory that attempts to explain all religious phenomena. Hick refers to his theory as a "pluralistic hypothesis." Hick's hypothesis is that all religions are culturally conditioned responses to the same Real from within variant ways of being human.¹⁹

¹⁵ Alan Race, *Christians and Religious Pluralism: Patterns in the Christian Theology of Religions* (London: SCM, 1983), viii.

¹⁶ Charles Van Engen, *Mission on the Way* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1996), 171.

¹⁷ For instance, Engen proposes a fourth paradigm, the evangelist paradigm, *Mission on the Way*, 176.

¹⁸ John Hick, *God Has Many Names* (London: Macmillian, 1980), 6.

¹⁹ John Hick's pluralist hypothesis,

While acknowledging the pluralist's concern for "those who have no opportunity to respond to the direct message of Jesus and Christianity", Evangelicals believe that a more open way to salvation as held by pluralists is "unbiblical tenets", therefore, "reject pluralism."²⁰

Inclusivism is that position which "affirms the salvific presence of God in non-Christian religions while still maintaining that Christ is the definitive and authoritative revelation of God."²¹ This view is both an acceptance and a rejection of the other religions. On the one hand it accepts the spiritual power and depth manifest in them, so that they can rightly be considered as possessing elements of divine light and truth. On the other hand, it rejects them as not being sufficient for salvation apart from Christ, for Christ alone is Savior. To be inclusive is to believe that all truth, Christian and non-Christian, belongs ultimately to Christ.²² The most able spokesperson for this view was the Roman Catholic theologian, Karl Rahner.

Ebbie Smith thus evaluates inclusivism,

"More than pluralists, inclusivists base their views on biblical material and on theological foundations. While some evangelicals question much of their biblical interpretations, one must affirm their use of biblical and theological materials. The primary points of departure between inclusivist and exclusivist views rest on the teachings of "universally accessible salvation," "the viability of general revelation," the possibility of salvation in other religions, "anonymous Christians," and "postmodern evangelism." These concepts remain unacceptable to exclusivists."²³

The third view is exclusivism. Not only there are many variations of this position, but there are many spokespersons. Among the most notable in the last century were Samuel Zwemer, Hendrik Kraemer, W. A. Visser't Hooft, and Lesslie Newbigin.²⁴

This view relates salvation and/or liberation exclusively to one particular tradition, so that it is an article of faith that salvation is restricted to this one particular "community", the rest of humankind being either left out

http://www.thatreligiousstudieswebsite.com/Articles/Theology/Theology_of_Religions/john_hick_pluralism.html, accessed May 28, 2008.

²⁰ Ebbie Smith, *Contemporary Theology of Religions in Missiology: An Introduction to the Foundations, History, and Strategies of World Missions*, ed. John Mark Terry, Ebbie Smith and Justice Anderson (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1998), 419.

²¹ Gavid D'Costa, *Theology and Religious Pluralism: The Challenge of Other Religions* (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1986), 81.

²² Ivan M. Satyavrata and Abey George, "Religious Pluralism & Contemporary Theological Issues that Impines on Missiology for the 21st Century", *Missiology for the 21st Century: South Asia Perspectives*, ed. Roger E. Hedlund & Paul Joshua Bhakiaraj (Kashmere Gate, Delhi: ISPCK/MIIS, 2004), 275-276.

²³ Ebbie Smith, 426.

²⁴ James F. Lewis, 382.

of account or explicitly excluded from the sphere of salvation.²⁵ It answers the question “Is Jesus the only Savior?” with an uncompromising and unqualified yes, rests on two foundational convictions—Jesus is the only Savior, and only explicit faith in Christ leads to salvation.²⁶

Smith continues to give his evaluation of exclusivism from the standpoint of faithfulness to biblical and theological truth.

“Exclusivists should not declare other religions as evil or of no worth. Neither should they give the impression of not caring about the fate of the unevangelized. Exclusivists, nevertheless, find no biblical promise for salvation apart from explicit faith in the message of the historical Christ.

Their belief in objective, biblical revelation, in the basic doctrines of Christianity, and in what appears to them clear teachings on the finality of Christ and salvation in Him push them to reject both pluralism and inclusivism. These same beliefs push them to maintain their commitment to exclusivistic views.”²⁷

VI. Religion and religions: a Biblical Perspective

To Bible believing Christians, scholarly discussions can be informative and valuable provided they are in harmony with the teachings of the Bible. We see light in each position above, but are not completely satisfied with anyone of them.

At final analysis, all religions are ways of life. In other words, there is religion as long as there is life. The Bible starts with the creation of heavens and the earth in the context that a war broke out in heaven. The Bible ends with the final eradication of sin and all that goes with it, fallen angels, sinners and sin-affected heavens and earth and everything in them.

After the creation work is finished, God made the Sabbath, a day of rest and worship, for man (Gen. 2:1-3). To worship God and enjoy His holy Sabbath was the first thing Adam and Eve did, after Adam named all the animals, and they married.

In answering to Job’s questions, God said to him,

“Gird up now thy loins like a man; for I will demand of thee, and answer thou me.

Where wast thou when I laid the foundations of the earth? declare, if thou hast understanding.

Who hath laid the measures thereof, if thou knowest? or who hath stretched the line upon it?

Whereupon are the foundations thereof fastened? or who laid the corner stone thereof;

²⁵ Frank Wahling, ed. *The World’s Religious Traditions: Current Perspectives in Religious Studies* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark Ltd., 1984), 150.

²⁶ Ebbie Smith, 426.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 433.

When the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy?”

Job 38:3-7

These verses tell that the morning stars and all the sons of God participated the first Sabbaath day, the holy day of the LORD's rest. Revelation reveals more scenes of worship in heaven in the future (Rev. 4; 5; 19; 21-22). In the new Jerusalem, the redeemed, together with the angels, shall worship the Redeemer forever and ever.

For as the new heavens and the new earth, which I will make, shall remain before me, saith the LORD, so shall your seed and your name remain. And it shall come to pass, that from one new moon to another, and from one sabbath to another, shall all flesh come to worship before me, saith the LORD.

Isaiah 66:22-23

“From one Sabbath to another, shall all flesh come to worship before me, saith the LORD.” These Bible texts shows the worship to the Creator God is an eternal theme, is the way of the created life. “Fear God, and give glory to him” and “worship the Father in spirit and in truth” is the eternal religion of the Bible (Rev. 14:7; John 4:23). The religion of the Bible is the true religion which is true worship of the true Creator God, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

The Bible also reveals that there are false religions which involve worshiping not the Creator God but created beings, living or images. Rather than elevating and uplifting, these types of false religions only debase those worshippers. Example is seen in the tragic fall of Lucifer, who exalted self above all others and presumptuously thinking to be equal with the Most High (Isaiah 14: 12-14; Rev. 12: 7-9). This self-centered idolatry was continued in the fall of Adam and the woman in the garden of Eden.

The Bible reveals that all false religions start with self (Deut. 4:28; 2Chro. 32:19; Isa. 14: 12-14; Rom. 1:19-23; Ps. 50: 21; 115:4; 135:15; Isa 37:19). Sometimes it appears in the forms of idolatry with Adam and Eve, or distortion of true religion as in the case of Cain and Able (Gen. 4). In the case of Adam and the woman, it was self-exalted to become a idol to be equal with God which caused their yielding to the temptation of the serpent. In the case of Cain and Able, false religion took a different form. Both Cain and Able brought offerings to the LORD, but one was according to the LORD's instruction and the other his own way based on his own judgment. Both were worshippers of true God, but one was true worshipper and the other false worshipper. One practiced true religion, the other false religion. This self-centered worship leads to all forms of self-centered isms and religions, and worship of the true God in self-rationalized way leads to counterfeit of true Bible religion. All human religions find their roots in these two types of false religions.

The Ten Commandments not only reveal to us who is to be worshipped, but how, with a specific day of worship. It also gives instruction what not to worship and how to live a life of a true worshipper (Ex. 20:1—17).

The Bible predicts the coming of religious pluralism in Christianity and calls the faithful people of God out of the confused system. It also predicts the eventual and complete annihilation of all other systems of religious thoughts (Isa. 4: 1; 31: 3; 7; Jere. 51:47; Ezek. 30:13; Mic. 1:7; Zech. 13:2; Matt. 24: 24; Rev. 14: 8-11; 18:4; 22:15).

“To the law and to the testimony; if they speak not according to this word, [it is] because [there is] no light in them.” Isaiah 8:20. The law of God is the test stone for true or false religion. Our approach to the study of religion is, therefore, a prophetic one, taking the Ten Commandments and the whole counsel of God as the revealed divine standard. We repeat again, religion is neither a “thing” out there nor just a “word”, a way of life, it IS a way of life, either a way of life according to the divine principles or a self-centered life in various forms.

A New Paradigm for a Theology of Religions

Engen coins a different set of terminology to describe these aforementioned three positions. A creation paradigm corresponds to pluralism; a paradigm of universal soteriology to inclusivism and an ecclesiocentric paradigm to exclusivism. Standing with mostly exclusivists, Engen introduces a new paradigm: an evangelist paradigm to replace the term for exclusivism.

VII. The Elements of “Evangelism:--A Fourth Paradigm

1. Starting point: the confession “Jesus Christ is Lord”
2. Absolutism regarding a personal faith relationship with the risen Jesus Christ as Lord; relativism in terms of the shape this takes in church and culture
3. Prior choice: personal faith in Jesus Christ (he was born, lived, ministered, died, rose, ascended, and is coming again) by grace and in the power of the Holy Spirit
4. Concern about human coexistence amidst multiple culture and religions
5. Understanding of Romans 5: 12-29: “as in Adam... so in Christ” is not completely symmetrical
6. Equally verticalist and horizontalist orientation
7. All cultures (including our own) regarded as fallen, but also as able to teach us something new about how “Jesus Christ is Lord”
8. Seriousness regarding the consequences of the fall and of sin
9. Some optimism about cultures—affirmation of culture yet pessimism about human sinfulness
10. Bible regarded as God’s inspired revelation for all humanity—it has new things to say to each new culture where the gospel takes root
11. Strong emphasis on confession anew in word and life, “Jesus is Lord”
12. Strong emphasis on conversion and sometimes on transformation

13. Personal relationship with Jesus Christ a necessary
14. Holy Spirit viewed as working simultaneously but differently in the world, in and through the church, and in the believer for mission in the world
15. Moderate optimism about the institutional church—the orientation is more toward the kingdom of God
16. Consciousness of the kingdom of darkness and the demonic both in the world and in the church
17. Ultimately creative, ever-changing theology-on-the-way approached that calls for new Christologies in new cultural settings
18. Success among folk religions
19. Tendency to be confrontational with other global religious systems
20. Mission defined as calling people in multiple cultures to conversion, confession, and new allegiance, personally and corporately, to Jesus Christ as Lord²⁸

For evangelist, to acknowledge Jesus Christ is the Lord also means to be faith-particularist, culturally pluralist, and ecclesiology-inclusivist. Using Engen's own words, he "has not said much that is new."²⁹

Like Engen, we introduce "the cosmic conflict paradigm" for the theology of religions.³⁰ In this connection and with some modification, the two broad questions Baird raised to understand religion as he defines it become relevant and helpful.

- What problem or problems about the human condition are implied in the ultimate concerns of persons (Persons) and groups (Groups)?
- By what means and methods are the problems resolved?³¹

The answers to these questions are: sin and the gospel. More specifically, the transgression of the law of God and salvation through Jesus Christ, the Son of God and Son of man, the Word made flesh, who took the human form to live among men and died for the sins of the world, who rose from the dead and ascended to heaven to be High Priest to intercede for a lost world, who helps those believe in him to keep the God's commandments of God by the power of the Holy Spirit, who will come back to redeem the faithful believers and restore the lost image of God in man again and bring them to heaven, who will destroy sin and all goes with it and create a new heaven and new earth, who will live among men forever (Matt. 1: 18-23; John 1:14; Phil. 2:5-8; Heb. 8: 1; Rev. 1:7; 14:12; 19:11-16; 21:1, 3; 5; 22: 5; 12, 14).

George W. Peters is right when he says,

²⁸ Engen, 177-178.

²⁹ Engen, 177-187.

³⁰ This paper is part of a larger work titled "Cosmic Conflict Paradigm for Missiology" and the paradigm will be expounded elsewhere, so there is no discussion about the paradigm itself here.

³¹ James F. Lewis, 26.

“Christian mission makes sense only in the light of an existing abnormality or emergency and in the conviction that an answer to and remedy for such a malady is available. Therefore I address myself first of all to the malady or emergency which exists and which, from the historical and eternal perspective, demands action. The emergency is the fact of sin in the world which has overpowered and infected the human race and which threatens the very existence of mankind. There would be no need for Christian missions if sin were not a serious reality. Neither would the doctrine of soteriology make sense without the presence and awfulness of sin. Sin made salvation necessary and sin makes Christian missions necessary.”³²

The cosmic conflict paradigm sees three orders of created beings: angels, unfallen worlds and man. What concerns God is that by the transgression of His holy law, the transcript of His very character, the image of God in the created beings was lost, and sin will bring death to sinners (Rom. 6:23). It concerns God the most that His character and glory is being questioned by His created beings whose eyes are blurred by sin. It is also the concern of God that “any should perish, but that all should come to repentance” (2 Pet. 3:9), and the means and methods to resolve the problem involves God and all of His created beings in the whole cosmos. “God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life” (John 3:16). The unfallen angels are to minister “for them who shall be heirs of salvation” (Heb. 1:14). All are engaged in the cosmic conflict between good and evil, between Christ and Satan.

VIII. Conclusion

“And I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel.” Genesis 3:15

From the perspective of the cosmic conflict paradigm, the appearance and continuation of different forms of religions is understood as continuation of the cosmic conflict between good and evil, between Christ and Satan, in different forms, variations and locations.

It is a historical fact that there were great thinkers and philosophers among men, but they were reflecting the light of the True Light “which lighteth every man that cometh into the world” (John 1:9).

“The world has had its great teachers, men of giant intellect and extensive research, men whose utterances have stimulated thought and opened to view vast fields of knowledge; and these men have been honored as guides and benefactors of their race; but there is One who stands higher than they. We can trace the line of the world’s teachers as far back as human records extend; but the Light was before them. As the moon and the stars of our solar system shine by the reflected light of the sun, so, as far as their teaching is true, do the world’s great thinkers reflect the rays of the Sun of Righteousness. Every gleam of thought, every flash of the

³² George W. Peters, *A Biblical Theology of Mission* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1972), 15.

intellect, is from the Light of the world.”³³

The light God imparted through these men were means to lead man to God. God loves and tries to save the world, Satan hates and attempts to deceive and destroy mankind. Around the teachings of great human thinkers world religions were built. What God intends to bless and save by imparting truth through these men, Satan mixes truth with error and stimulates man-made religions to substitute true religion of God.

Jesus is the “good shepherd” who “knows my [sheep], and am known of mine” (John 10:14); “And other sheep I have, which are not of this fold; them also I must bring, and they shall hear my voice; and there shall be one fold, [and] one shepherd” (John 10:16). Jesus recognizes there are His sheep in other folds, whom He will bring into one fold and under one Shepherd. Human tradition separates God’s people, but the grace of God will bring the people of God together wherever they may be. It is true that there is no salvation outside of Jesus Christ, however, people in other religions could be saved as long as they faithfully follow the Light given to them. No religion saves, even Christianity. It is Jesus alone that saves!

From the perspective of cosmic conflict paradigm, all non-biblical religions are false. It is true that some truth can be found in all of them, some even claim to believe in the Bible, but add or take way some part from the word of God, and some distort the plain truth in the Bible. To the latter, the Bible is clear,

“For I testify unto every man that heareth the words of the prophecy of this book, If any man shall add unto these things, God shall add unto him the plagues that are written in this book: And if any man shall take away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part out of the book of life, and out of the holy city, and from the things which are written in this book” (Rev.22:18-19).

Satan quoted an incomplete passage to tempt Jesus in the wilderness. He is doing the same today, to lead people astray by leaving out or adding more to what is the plain word of God (Luke 4:9-11). Thus, Christianity that does not follow the whole counsel of God falls into false religions. In the cosmic conflict paradigm, we apply pluralism and inclusivism to people, not to their belief systems; exclusivism is applied to the way of salvation and Savior. There is no other way of salvation but Jesus Christ alone. These categories are not necessary in cosmic conflict paradigm for we make a distinction between people and their belief systems. People can even be in the right belief system, but will be lost. System itself does not save, Jesus saves.

Jesus is the truth, wherever truth is found it is Jesus’ truth. Satan may mix error with truth, but he will never become the originator and source of truth. God’s truth is closely connected with His divine commandments. “He that saith, I know him, and keepeth not His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him” (1John 2:4). The commandments of God even separate false Christianity from true Christianity.

The cosmic conflict paradigm does not contradict itself in confirming the fact that there are people in the wrong systems that will be saved and people in the right system that will be lost and lose the impetus for

³³ Ellen White, *Education*, The Complete Published Ellen G. White Writings, The Ellen White Estate, Inc. 15.

gospel witnessing. All should see the glory of God as the supreme purpose of Christian mission, not merely human salvation. All Christians are missionaries for God, for all are soldiers for God in the cosmic conflict between good and evil. They are to do their best to maximize the glory of God. Greater light will come to all those who walk in the light. The greater Light that people follow, the greater glory goes to God, till the earth is covered with His glory. “For mine own sake, even for mine own sake, will I do it: for how should my name be polluted? And I will not give my glory unto another” (Isa. 48:11).

The issue of religious pluralism of world religions will be a temporary one, for non-biblical religions will come to an end when the cosmic conflict ends. However, the cosmic conflict paradigm understands that Christian religion will continue to be an eternal reality, to worship God and ceaselessly reflect His glory and His image. Christian missions, as understood within the cosmic conflict paradigm, will come to an end. A new mission will be assigned to the redeemed to bring glory to the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, forever and ever, telling the story that “God is love.”