Introduction: Theologies of Religions in the Twenty-First Century

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The question of the theology of religions has become a key part of discussions over the last thirty or so years. We should note that this is a discussion that began in, and is still dominated by, the Christian tradition. As such, the fact that this text reflects this is seen as more a survey of the situation than a normative situation we would wish to perpetuate. Indeed, as discussed below, we have attempted to widen the debate into the context of, and in relation to, other religions. From a fringe interest it has become something that has to be addressed. We should note that we speak very much from a Western (European-North American) context here. The relation of Christianity to the religious Other has been of central concern in other parts of the world for far longer, but for better or worse the Western context still has a certain global hegemony despite the shift in demographics to the Global South. Christian systematic theology now seems incomplete without a discussion on both the religious Other and the changing demographics of Christianity and what this means. Introductions to Christianity or theology will address religious Others as an area of concern, while ecclesial communities have committees and forums to address and engage the religious Other. Over that time a central focus of those discussions has been the typology of exclusivisms-inclusivisms-pluralisms\(^1\) (often now with particularities added as a fourth paradigm), which was first introduced by Alan Race in his classic 1983 book *Christians and Religious Pluralism: Patterns in the Christian Theology of Religions*. It was, indeed, the thirtieth anniversary of that book which saw two initiatives come together which led to the current volume. On one side, Elizabeth Harris and Shanthikumar Hettiarachchi were putting together an edited book. On the other, Paul Hedges, with Alan Race, was planning a conference with a follow up publication. Inevitably, the two ventures started to call on the same people and the organisers of each (and the contributors) soon saw the merits of combining forces to produce the current volume. However, the result is far from a simple paean to the typology or a fest-schrift to Alan Race, although we offer this volume in honour of his landmark contribution. Rather, it marks the deep and growing conversation around the

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\(^1\) Although initially used in the singular, Race later suggested using the plural to indicate that each paradigm does not indicate simply one standpoint, but rather includes a range of views. This usage first appeared and was explained in Hedges and Race (2008).
theology of religions that continues beyond the thirtieth anniversary of that work.

It would be useful if we say something to contextualise and provide a background for these debates. First, Alan’s typology (his “patterns”) of the 1983 volume has become the standard marker for debates and classifications. In brief we can describe these patterns as follows.

*Exclusivisms:* only my religion is true; all other religions are false and lead people astray. God or a transcendent reality has ordained one path to lead people to Him (Her/It) and failure to follow this means you are not included in the chosen or elect.

*Inclusivisms:* while my religion is the most true, God or a transcendent reality is known to all humanity and so other religions are ways leading towards the truth found in my tradition. True followers of other religions will come to the truth in my religion eventually.

*Pluralisms:* I simply do not know if there is only one true religion or many true religions. Followers of other religions have a depth of prayer life, insight into truth, spiritual aspirations, and ethical ideals which at least equal my own. If God is as loving and big as I believe Her/Him to be, or if liberation is intended for all, I cannot limit truth to just the path I know.

However, since then various people have suggested that these paradigms can be understood in different ways. Some argue that these three options are the range of all religiously possible options. They are, therefore, logical markers of the debate. Such a position is most associated with Perry Schmidt-Leukel (2005). Others suggest that the terms are more descriptive and heuristic and represent a range of standpoints which are not always clearly distinct, and that, at the borders, each merges into the next. In these terms, it is possible to add on further categories, like particularities. Such a position has been argued by, for instance, Hedges (2008, 2010) and Paul Knitter (2002). Still others have suggested various other permutations of the typology or alternative typologies (see Hedges 2008). The typology has also been the subject of often bitter dispute, with some suggesting it is fundamentally flawed or biased, although some telling rebukes of these criticisms have been made (see Hedges 2008, Schmidt-Leukel 2005). Perhaps, most significant amongst these critics are advocates of comparative theology who suggest that engaging other religions using the tools of comparative theology bypasses the typology and its

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2 It should be noted that Schmidt-Leukel would add that another logical possibility would be that no religion is true, but he suggests this is not a religious option in the way the others are.