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Constructing A Global Theology: An Assessment of the Christian Dogmatics of Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen

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Sometime ago many theologians in the West considered the genre of Christian dogmatics as practically, if not formally, dead. In the middle of plurality of voices, belief commitments, traditions, experiences, and other epistemic and non-epistemic starting points, the whole endeavour seemed to be just too massive, and even impossible, for anyone to undertake. It seems that many theologians did not receive the memo. In the recent years, we have seen a plethora of prolegomenas and full scale dogmatics being published by major academic publishers.¹

One of the authors to contribute to this recent revitalization of Christian dogmatics is professor Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen (Fuller Theological Seminary). Kärkkäinen has just published the fifth and final volume of his series *A Constructive Christian Theology for the Pluralistic World*.² In Finland (Kärkkäinen's home), the last Christian dogmatics before his were published in 1951 and 1954 by Osmo Tiilikä, so A

¹ Two recent examples are Katherine Sonderegger, *Systematic Theology. Volume 1, The Doctrine of God* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2015); Paul R. Hinlicky, *Beloved Community: Critical Dogmatics after Christendom* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2015).

² Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *Christ and Reconciliation. A Constructive Christian Theology for the Pluralistic World Vol. 1* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013). Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *Trinity and Revelation. A Constructive Christian Theology for the Pluralistic World. Vol. 2.* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014); Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *Creation and Humanity. A Constructive Christian Theology for the Pluralistic World Vol. 3.* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2015); Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *Spirit and Salvation. A Constructive Christian Theology for the Pluralistic World. Vol. 4.* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2016); Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *Hope and Community. A Constructive Christian Theology for the Pluralistic World. Vol. 5.* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2017).

Constructive Christian Theology for the Pluralistic World is a momentous accomplishment for Finnish theology as well as global theology.³

Kärkkäinen is by no means a run-of-the-mill Finnish theologian. He was the first Pentecostal Christian to earn a PhD in the Faculty of Theology at the University of Helsinki.⁴ His work on Pentecostal-Catholic dialogue was supervised by a student of Tuomo Mannermaa (1937–2015), who was the father of so-called Finnish interpretation of Luther. Kärkkäinen has also served as the dean of a Pentecostal Bible college Iso Kirja in Finland and taught theology in Thailand. This wide ecumenical and cosmopolitan experience is highlighted throughout the work.

Concerning the method

Traditionally, one central function of modern systematic or other constructive theologies has been to chart a “third way” between the extremes. This has been the goal of Friedrich Schleiermacher, Adolf von Harnack, Rudolf Bultmann, Karl Barth, George Lindbeck, Alister McGrath, Kevin Vanhoozer, Paul Hinlicky, and also Kärkkäinen. This typically requires locating a problem or weakness in theology that has become apparent. According to Kärkkäinen, our problem today is the lack of a global perspective in theology and a consequent eurocentrism. He goes on to propose a global angle to traditional theological topics, which is then set into a dialogue with traditional European, or to be precise, Mediterranean, tradition.

³ Osmo Tiilikä, *Systemaattinen Teologia I* (Porvoo, 1951); Osmo Tiilikä, “Systemaattinen Teologia II” (Porvoo, 1954).

⁴ Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *Spiritus Ubi Vult Spirat. Pneumatology in Roman Catholic - Pentecostal Dialogue (1972-1989)* (Helsinki: Luther-Agricola-Society, 1998).

Kärkkäinen seeks to write Christian dogmatics in a way that starts from Christian tradition in terms of concepts and questions but then goes on to relate these to world religions. Obviously, this does not mean selecting one's partners in dialogue so that they already agree with Kärkkäinen's views. The views presented are diverse, but they are treated with respect and reverence. Kärkkäinen presents classical Christian views on standard doctrinal topics and then invites other voices in hospitable dialogue. Obviously, this can be challenging at times. Sometimes the amount of voices can be deafening and the shifts from one tradition to another can be so quick that it leaves the reader wondering what just happened. This is balanced with Kärkkäinen's own voice that moves to conversation and often offers interventions that give book structure.

Kärkkäinen states that his method is postfoundational. This term can be given very technical definitions. Loosely understood "postfoundational" means that the task of dogmatics is to integrate various factors so that they resonate with each other.⁵ In the Protestant tradition, the Bible has been *norma normans non normata*, a norm that is not normed by any other norm, but Lutherans since the beginning of Reformation have realized that this principle is not as simple as it may seem. For example, already Matthias Flacius Illyricus (1520–1575) understood how our prejudices and other commitments will affect our reading of the Scriptures.⁶

It has been common for Christian traditions to think that such things as reason, science, philosophy, experience, and tradition belong to the essential things that guide the church when it goes on to define its existence in the new contexts. Therefore, the

⁵ See, e.g., F. LeRon Shults, *The Postfoundationalist Task of Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998).

⁶ Flacius wrote his famous *Clavis Scripturae Sacrae* (1567) as a guide to the correct interpretation of the Scriptures.

church has never stood on a one-legged stool, but it has always had several legs. Postfoundationalism can be seen as a way to formalize this natural state of affairs, and in this particular case, it includes not just sciences but also different religious experiences and traditions as Kärkkäinen includes several major World Religions as his dialogue partners.

As already stated, Kärkkäinen wishes to write his dogmatics within the critical tradition. In our time, this angle has produced various diverse takes on doctrinal loci. In the beginning of the first volume, he mentions how certain revisionist versions of dogmatics started from particular experience. An obvious problem of this methodology was expressed by David Tracy (University of Chicago), who wished to resist certain traditionalist trends of Yale postliberalism. However, if the starting point is too narrow all that is left is “fragments”, and dogmatics as *systematic* theology becomes impossible.⁷ Tracy also noted how the systematic task of theology becomes difficult if the goal posts are moving all the time. No coherent whole can be constructed, and there can be ultimately no Christian identity that becomes affirmed outside that particular experience.

Kärkkäinen leans more towards Yale than Chicago. According to him, systematic theology can be constructed, if only in a partial manner, on a canonical and common creedal basis. Thus, the project is grounded, but simultaneously open-ended.

Ecumenism and theology of religions

Kärkkäinen’s dialogical style honors Christian tradition and its denominational varieties. His experience in ecumenical theology is put to a more general use in the course of this work. The pursuit of unity among the Christians and the hope of mutual

⁷ David Tracy, “Hidden and Incomprehensible God,” *Reflections*, no. Autumn (2000): 62–88.

recognition is present, for example, in his elaboration of the *filioque* question (II, 277–282) and in examination of baptism (V, 370–389). The question of baptism is investigated thoroughly as it is still a painful question among the Christian traditions. Kärkkäinen’s solution reflects the sensibilities of *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry* (WCC, 1982). Here he also offers practical suggestions.

Kärkkäinen enters into a dialogue with four major religious traditions: Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam. This makes his approach unique among contemporary systematic theologies. It opens the doors to the world of theologies where only few of us has had time or ability to wander. Sometimes other traditions are presented descriptively while sometimes they are engaged more profoundly and deeply with arguments and counter-arguments. The dialogical method finds its shape little by little so that the later volumes become sharper compared to the earlier ones. However, even this amount of information is inspiring and it encourages the reader to form their own proposals to the questions and themes which appear preliminary. Nonetheless, even descriptive accounts are interesting and inspiring.

Kärkkäinen also has his own ideas and views. Sometimes his voice is buried under the mountains of material and details. At those moments, the thematic laboring and theological ponderings are carried forward only by referring to other scholars and the reader is left without the author’s clear tone. Kärkkäinen’s voice, when it is openly stated, is the mostly traditional voice of a “western white male theologian”. The other voices are introduced with care and brought forth from all corners of the earth and from various global opinions and conversations. These other voices bring their flavor to the conversations, but is the voice of the white western male theologian always the

dominant one? It needs to be stated that Kärkkäinen is transparent concerning his own background and views and he does not attempt to represent himself as something else, which can be seen as a strength. This feature, a style of dispassionate writing from a chosen position, can be found for example from the section which comments on the experiential nature of theological writing. It is impartial while respecting experience.

Method in action

To highlight Kärkkäinen's methodological solution, we want to draw attention to three concepts that crystallize his approach well. These can be found from the book II, ("classical panentheism"), book III ("multidimensional monism"), and book V (the discussion of the theology of time and its relation to eschatology).

Sometimes it is claimed that Christianity adopted many elements into its doctrine of God from Hellenistic philosophy so that at least some kind of revision is needed.⁸ Kärkkäinen thinks that there is some truth in these claims. However, he does not want to discard the core claims of classical theism, as he thinks that many panentheistic vision wander too far to be recognized as Christian anymore. He wishes to sustain a position he calls "radical middle" (II, 226) that merges ideas from process theologies, death-of-God theologies, feminist revisionist ideas, and also from classical theism.

Kärkkäinen argues that panentheism is actually older than classical theism and equally faithful to both the Hebrew Scriptures, and theological and philosophical traditions of the West. He uses sources from mystical theology, Jonathan Edwards, Jürgen Moltmann and liberation theologians to argue this point. Classical panentheism

⁸ For discussion, see, e.g., Thomas Jay Oord, ed., *Theologies of Creation: Creatio Ex Nihilo and Its New Rivals* (London: Routledge, 2015).

holds that the presence and activity of the divine in the created order is real and important, but Kärkkäinen simultaneously emphasizes the transcendent otherness of God. God is not reduced to the processes of this world even if God participates in creation (because that would make God dependent on the world and effectively make God an ontotheological entity).⁹ The tension between distance and proximity reflects not only the features of Kärkkäinen's conciliatory method, but also its confessional nature. Kärkkäinen does not accede the newest trends of potentially reductive and this-worldly theological innovations but rather elevates the sovereign and inscrutable nature of God rising from the tradition of classical theism.

"Multidimensional monism" is a term Kärkkäinen coins to conceptualize the human constitution within theological anthropology (III, 280). How should we understand human personhood, especially the questions about the self, soul and consciousness in relation to the advance of sciences that seem to reduce everything mental to the material? The challenge is to acknowledge the differences between the bodily and mental aspects of humanity while recognizing their undivided nature, and how this dilemma has been approached in philosophical, theological, and scientific literature. Kärkkäinen underlines the foundational unity of the created order but in equal measure the multidimensional nature of our reality. Here he builds on the work of John Polkinghorne and Michael Welker, who have suggested similar approaches to this dilemma. Multidimensional monism means that we resist the materialist forms of reductionism, while both subscribing to the fundamental unity of human subject (without which we will only land to self-refuting and incoherent positions) and acknowledging the

⁹ Of course, this is something that classical theisms gladly subscribe to, see, for example, David Bentley Hart, *The Hidden and the Manifest* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2017).

relative autonomy of sciences, which they can use to propose theories about human nature.

Does multidimensional monism offer a normative account of human nature? No, but it sets a certain framework, or perhaps *desiderata*, for the discussion, which theologians and also scientists should pay attention to. At this point in human history, we do not have comprehensive scientific accounts of human nature at our disposal, so we can expect that the conversation will continue for some time. Yet there is hope for reasonable conversation if we pay attention to these various concerns.

The last example concerns eschatology from the viewpoint of the debates between science and religion (V, 90). Here Kärkkäinen wishes to affirm both robust faith in the coming *new* creation and care for *this* creation. Although new creation is supposed to be new, the canonical writings seem to depict it as something that is connected with our current state. New creation is not something completely different, but something that grows out of our current world but in ways we cannot really anticipate in any reasonable manner. God's life should not be understood as absolute timelessness and immutability as this gives us unbiblical account of the life in communion with God in eschaton. God's existence is fundamentally Trinitarian and relational and we are called to participate in this communion already in this life. How could the coming life be less than what we experience here, especially when the church confesses its faith in the resurrection of the *body* and not just the soul? This Trinitarian grounding of eschatology is supposed to affirm our actions to care and improve the state of our current world. Our thriving for the better world should not go unrewarded, not in this life and not in the next.

Postfoundationalism and justification of religious beliefs

Let us briefly return to the methodological question. Is it so that even global theology is necessary local theology, namely, because it arises from the needs of a particular group of people, and these needs are not universally shared? Is global theology a privilege of mostly a Western, or Western educated, cosmopolitan elite? Global theology would, in this case, be a genre directed to those few people who live and move easily in a multi- or post-cultural state, where different religions and worldviews exist within a same space. Maybe, but this is not necessarily a problem if we understand the meaning of global theology correctly.

Many Western cities, even if they are multicultural, consist of several societal bubbles. For many Finns, Buddhism is a foreign and genuinely strange thing, and something they have never really encountered. At the same, there are several Buddhist communities in Helsinki, but they are invisible to the most of us.

There are many interesting phenomena in the world, many of which could teach us a thing or two, but our energy and possibilities to perceive the other is limited. How could we perceive something that we cannot truly encounter? And even if we could recognize the existence of other religious traditions, how should, say, pastors from Montana or North Karelia take these perspectives into account in their daily practice of Christian dogma?

Kärkkäinen opens many doors for his readers, which one can pass through if one wishes to do so. For many, Asian interpretations of incarnation seem remote and hard to understand, but there is value even in realizing that someone has thought through

these interpretations. Each person's context decides how the global aspect of theology is realized. This opening of doors of recognition and understanding is perhaps the first, and easiest step as it does not necessarily require much in practice.

However, the examination of different positions can raise a more serious question that concern the epistemic duties that follow from recognition of other positions. A nihilistic interpretation would be to say that all we have is a perspective and that's that. No one has right to claim that they have it right and you people over there have it wrong. This is not a very reasonable stance to take (it is self-refuting, for starters), and Kärkkäinen does not make this claim either. **From the fact that one realizes that he or she is situated in a context follows nothing with regard to the possibility to claim that this perspective does not get at least something right.** This is a given without which no form of human enquiry can make progress. We always start from where we are, and from that point we strive towards generality and maximal truthlikeness. This fits well with postfoundationalism when it is coupled with theological realism.

We think that the theologies of, for example, Lutheran orthodoxy or the Enlightenment should not be deemed problematic just because they are local or interested in only a relatively limited set of questions which are meaningful only for a selected group of people. If they are problematic, they are such because they contain something that we can on good grounds consider to be something that is not supported by the evidence at hand. Locality, otherness, experience, minority or majority status as such are not epistemic categories, which by themselves can create epistemic duties.¹⁰

¹⁰ Of course, this does not mean that they can never have an epistemic value. See , e.g., Miranda Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

Let it be noted that these, and many other goals, including purely aesthetic goals can be regarded as legitimate in systematic theology, but they cannot be ultimately be separated from the question of truth.

Postfoundationalists have not yet reached a consensus regarding how this method should answer the question about the justification of religious beliefs. For example, Mikael Stenmark has noted how postfoundationalism is inherently inclined towards epistemic internalism.¹¹ Epistemic internalism claims that in order for beliefs to be justified, they need to pass the test of public evaluation; they must be examined using criteria as objective as possible and they need to defeat all the possible challenges aimed at them. In other words, the justified beliefs need to be more probable than their alternatives.¹²

Kärkkäinen discusses the results of many sciences and claims of various worldviews but he does not explicitly address the question about epistemic justification. One of the epistemic goals of dialogical method is the increase in understanding, but understanding can be different from the question of truth and the duty to believe only those things, which one is within their epistemic rights to believe. For example, is a Christian justified in believing in the divinity of Christ only after she has internal justification to her beliefs? That is, only after she has presented her views to the global audience and emerged victorious? This seems to be a tall order.

Kärkkäinen appears to be leaning to this direction, at least occasionally. He presents other views fairly and offers transparent arguments against them, sometimes

¹¹ Mikael Stenmark, *How to Relate Science and Religion: A Multidimensional Model* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co, 2004).

¹² See, e.g., Richard Swinburne, *Faith and Reason*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

agreeing and sometimes disagreeing with his interlocutors. In this sense, the method is scholastic: one particular view emerges after series of arguments and counterarguments. Yet it is obvious that the number of claims is huge and even 1500 pages is not enough to engage every topic from genuinely global point of view. But this is a good start.

Afterword

Kärkkäinen offers a unique, monumental, and inspiring take on Christian theology as it exists today in the interphase of many languages, sciences, cultures, worldviews, and traditions. When one considers everything that challenges the church in our contemporary world, the work is as accessible as possible. This might not be the work of systematic theology that one should assign for freshmen, but it surely gives a lot to think about to those who are more experienced.

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