

**CONSTRUCTING A THEOLOGY OF RELATIONAL LIFE  
THROUGH THE THEMES OF CREATION, INCARNATION,  
AND RE-CREATION AS AN ALTERNATIVE TO  
CURRENT CATEGORIES OF RELIGIONS**

Name of researcher: Andrew Tompkins  
Name of faculty adviser: Wagner Kuhn, PhD  
Date completed: February 2019

This dissertation argues that current categories of religions are overly reliant on Western Enlightenment-based presuppositions and academic thinking that creates barriers in understanding God's desire for all people to have abundant life. Many theologians and missiologists utilize these inherited categories without first subjecting them to the biblical canon. As a result, the theological and missiological discourse on religions is often grounded in extra-biblical presuppositions rooted primarily in an overly high view of human reason. These presuppositions do not accurately portray a biblical approach to relational life.

The purpose of this dissertation is to deconstruct the categories of religions that have been inherited and used by theologians and missiologists. The categories of religions are meant to be wide ranging and include terms or terminology that scholars have used to describe large groups of people or ideologies such as: Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism, Islam, Christianity, animism, folk religions, tribal religions, atheism, Marxism, etc. In the space created by deconstructing the categories of religions a constructive theology of relational life—which is terminology meant to be used in place of the terms culture and religion—rooted in the biblical themes of creation, Incarnation, and re-creation is developed.

This project utilizes an interdisciplinary approach to research. It involved surveying and critically engaging with current literature in a number of fields including historical studies of religion, anthropology, sociology, biblical studies, systematic theology, and missiology. This follows Veli-Matti Kärkäinen and Kevin J. Vanhoozer's methodological arguments in favor of an interdisciplinary approach to theology.

By deconstructing the categories of religions, three major implications for missiology and theology were discovered. These three implications are: the objectification of people, racialized descriptions of life, and faulty teleological hope in the progress of humanity through the use of reason. While many philosophy of religion and history of religion scholars have recognized these problems they have struggled to develop meaningful solutions to the problems. This dissertation suggests that a solution for the implications is

---

found in the Bible by contrasting the category of religions with relational life as portrayed in the biblical themes of creation, Incarnation, and re-creation found in Genesis 1–3, John 1:1–18, and Revelation 20–22.

From the study of these biblical passages, it is then argued that a biblical understanding of relational life includes at least the following elements: work and rest, food and eating, language, human relationships and marriage, and clothing. These elements, rooted in the universal concepts that humanity is created in the Image of God, that God incarnated as Jesus to save humanity, and that God will re-create this earth, are more particular descriptors of humanity than the categories of religions and thus more reliable for engaging relationally. Therefore, it is better for theologians and missiologists to focus on the localized particularities of humanity in their diverse relational life rather than rely on categories of religions to develop meaningful theological and missiological concepts and engagements. It is then recommended that theologians and missiologists intentionally build relationships with people who live relationally in ways that are different from their own. As they do this they should intentionally turn to the Bible as the final arbitrating authority on ways of living in order to guide them in their relationships as well as their theological and missiological output.