“Coherent, Inclusive, Dialogical, Hospitable”: Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen’s Constructive Theological Method

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These four books are the first four volumes of a new five-volume systematic theology by the prolific theologian Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen. Kärkkäinen has been a professor of systematic theology at Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California, since 2000, and also has an appointment as docent of ecumenics at the University of Helsinki in his native Finland.

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Christ and Reconciliation (volume 1) examines the person (part 1: “Christ”) and work (part 2: “Reconciliation”) of Jesus Christ, treating along the way such topics as the significance of Jesus’ earthly life; evolving conceptions of messiahship; the question of Christ’s preexistence; the relationship of Logos Christologies and Spirit Christologies; views of atonement and reconciliation; and their connection to Christian mission. Trinity and Revelation (volume 2) weaves together an approach to the doctrines of God, the Trinity, and revelation by developing theologies of “Triune Revelation” (part 1) and the “Triune God” (part 2), addressing such theological questions as the relationship of revelation, history, and promise; the authority of scripture, tradition, and community; natural theology; and approaches to speaking properly of God, including whether to enumerate divine attributes, within a framework that maintains God’s relationality, communality, and hospitality as Trinity.

Creation and Humanity (volume 3) explores the world as God’s creation (part 1: “Creation”) and the human person as having a special role within it (part 2: “Humanity”), developing perspectives on such crucial matters as the importance of taking the sciences seriously in formulating doctrines of both creation and theological anthropology; cosmological and evolutionary perspectives as resources for theology; divine providence; the question of suffering and flourishing of life in general and of human life in particular; the uniqueness of the human person as created in imago Dei; and the nature of human nature. Unlike far too many systematic theologies, Spirit and Salvation (volume 4) articulates a helpful and robust pneumatology (part 1: “Spirit”) and connects it directly to soteriology (part 2: “Salvation”), taking up such topics along the way as the deep connections between pneumatology and the doctrine of the triune God and between pneumatology and the doctrine of creation; the discernment of spirits at various levels (personal, social, political, cosmic); the character of salvation as experienced as gift and transformation; the question of justification; and the role salvation plays in effecting two related groups of phenomena: “healing, restoration, and empowerment” and “reconciliation, liberation, and peacebuilding.”

It will be more than clear from reviewing just this partial list of the topics treated thus far in Kärkkäinen’s systematics that space here will not permit a detailed look at the content of it. What can and ought to be accomplished is a closer look at his theological method. While Kärkkäinen advances more than a few important theological
conversations by offering fresh perspectives on old problems (some of which are pointed out below), a case could be made that the most important contribution that his massive effort makes resides in his overall approach to the theological task.

Defining two of the key terms in Kärkkäinen’s name for the work as a whole begins to provide insight into his method. He calls his systematics *A Constructive Christian Theology for the Pluralistic World*. What he means by “constructive” and “pluralistic” is highly instructive with respect to characterizing his project. For Kärkkäinen, “constructive” is to be understood as synonymous with “systematic.” They are not actually synonyms, however, since like most theologians who characterize their theologies as constructive rather than as systematic, he marks a distinction between a systematic approach to theology that operates as if theological insights can be organized into neat and tidy systems without doing violence to the enterprise and a constructive impulse that seeks to build more complicated, textured, and forthrightly perspectival views. He champions the latter. Moreover, in Kärkkäinen’s estimation, the truth of what is delivered thereby is not demonstrated by adherence to the systematic principle that organizes, if not determines, what is offered, but by “coherence.” The particular coherence theory of truth that he employs, however, is not limited to connecting theological insights to one another within that single realm of discourse, resulting in an inward-looking “ghetto” focused solely on the church, a condition that he takes to be a significant limitation of the *non*foundationalism of the Yale School. Rather, it is one that maintains a coherence built across disparate areas of knowledge, exemplifying a constructive *post*foundationalism that Kärkkäinen wishes to extol.

This approach connects directly to Kärkkäinen’s emphasis on pluralism. His method is pluralistic in at least three senses. First, consistent with his broad coherence theory of truth, it features a *disciplinary* pluralism. He uses the mathematical concept of transversality as a metaphor to describe the multidisciplinary, intersectional, embodied, and contextual character of knowledge, arguing that, as

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Thomas Aquinas thought, what is claimed theologically must cohere with knowledge more broadly.4

Second, Kärkkäinen’s approach to Christian theology itself is marked by an ecumenical and contextual pluralism. While he himself is rooted in the Pentecostal tradition, his theological viewpoint is thoroughly informed by deep and sustained engagement with theologians from a wide range of times, places, and locations on the Christian spectrum. Moreover, he is refreshingly aware that he, “as a middle-aged European white male,”5 has perspectival limitations stemming from his context, that such limitations mark us all no matter what our contexts, that all theology has a context, whether the theologian is willing to admit that or not, and that, therefore, a constructive theology must engage theologies from as many contexts as possible.6 While this means taking seriously voices that have often been marginalized—“female theologians of various agendas such as feminist, womanist, and mujerista; women from Africa, Asia, and Latin America; other liberationists, including black theologians of the USA and sociopolitical theologians from South America, South Africa, and Asia; and postcolonialists”7—it does not mean wholesale acceptance of them. The wide diversity of theological views, put into conversation with one another and with Christian tradition, certainly shifts understanding but may not completely revise it. Kärkkäinen notes, presciently,

As a result—if I may put it somewhat daringly—should my approach to constructive theology be successful according to my own standards, the “traditionalists” would find my way of doing theology much too open to new voices, dialogue partners, and sets of issues, while “progressives” might lament that my proposal is still too much stuck with Christian tradition, both biblical and historical!8

Neither does it mean that Kärkkäinen does not have preferred interlocutors. Generally speaking, Wolfhart Pannenberg and Jürgen Moltmann are the two theologians to whose work Kärkkäinen returns

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7 Kärkkäinen, *Christ and Reconciliation*, xi–xii.
again and again while formulating his own proposals throughout the four volumes. He also often lifts up certain voices where particular topics are concerned. For example, Elizabeth Johnson, “the moderate Catholic feminist,” is frequently a go-to figure when a feminist voice is needed. On the person of Christ, the biblical scholar N. T. Wright looms large. Where a postfoundationalist approach to canonical method in theology is engaged, Kevin J. Vanhoozer’s work is accented. None of this, of course, impugns the importance of Kärkkäinen’s stated goal of treating often sidelined perspectives as “equal conversation partners,” which he does, particularly among liberationist theologians. His ecumenical and contextual pluralism is crucial to the strength and value of his project.

Third, extending ecumenical and contextual pluralism further, Kärkkäinen’s constructive theology attends to the reality of religious pluralism. It does this in three modes: (1) comparative religion, which seeks to describe and compare the features of religions; (2) Christian theology of religions, which is a theological examination of the role that non-Christian religions play in God’s economy; and (3) comparative theology, which investigates discrete topics or concepts across two or more religions with an eye toward understanding the extent to which they are understood and practiced similarly in each tradition. Of the three, Kärkkäinen’s emphasis is on the latter, the approach of comparative theology. This is a distinctive component of his theological method, one that receives a great deal of detailed and sustained attention. Kärkkäinen returns to the comparative theological exercise at regular intervals, investigating in depth how the theological matter being treated functions in other faiths (limited almost exclusively to Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism), and sometimes how other faiths view particular aspects of Christianity (for example, the Jewish understanding of Christian ideas of messianism or Islamic perspectives on Christian trinitarian theology). Again and again, Kärkkäinen reminds us that the goal is not to advance a facile type of theological religious pluralism, one positing that all religions are essentially and ultimately the same. (Kärkkäinen devotes an entire chapter in volume 2 to “The Failing Promises of Theo-Logical Pluralisms” that fully develops this view.) Rather, sensitivity to the integrity and complexity

9 Kärkkäinen, Creation and Humanity, 225.
10 Kärkkäinen, Christ and Reconciliation, xii.
of other faiths, as well as our own, helps us to see more clearly how each is different, unique, and particular, and allows us to dialogue across these differences in a spirit of confidence and hospitality. Engaging religious pluralism via comparative theology, it seems, does not so much reveal how Christianity and other faiths are “essentially” the same or different, but how much they are simply *themselves* and are to be honored as such. Kärkkäinen’s contention is that there is much to be learned by doing this.

These three pluralisms—disciplinary, ecumenical/contextual, and religious—each make crucial contributions to Kärkkäinen’s overall method, which requires engaging this breadth of knowledge in pursuing theological coherence and truth. Constructive theology is, therefore, an “integrative” discipline. In order to build a coherent “web” that incorporates more than solely theological concerns by taking the wider world directly into account, it must interact meaningfully with not only “biblical studies, church history and historical theology, philosophical theology, . . . [and] ministerial studies,” and not only with “religious studies, ethics, and missiology,” but also with “nontheological and nonreligious fields such as natural sciences, cultural studies, and . . . the study of living faiths.” This is the tack Kärkkäinen takes throughout the four volumes, to great effect, both in terms of his handling of the individual theological loci and the overall cumulative impact. For example, in framing his theological presentation of the doctrine of creation, Kärkkäinen notes that it will need to include: (1) reexamination of scripture and doctrinal history to recover an earlier non-duality between “nature” and “person”; (2) theological reaffirmation that to speak of the creation is to speak of the Creator who is a relational communion (as established in the preceding volume); (3) scriptural and theological attestation that creation cannot be understood rightly without a proper understanding of its eschatological destiny; (4) detailed, substantive, and sustained engagement with the natural sciences; (5) attention to ecumenical voices and theological perspectives from various confessional and doctrinal locations; and (6) careful consideration of the creation stories of the living faiths. In Kärkkäinen’s estimation, this provides a theologically rich view of creation that coheres with what he has already argued and will argue subsequently, and that accords with not only theological, Christian, or

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even religious knowledge alone, but also our best understanding of the realities that constitute the world, as broadly construed as possible.

For Kärkkäinen, there is no other way to do theology in what he calls our “‘post-’ world,” a world that is “postmodern, postfoundationalist, poststructuralist, postcolonial, postmetaphysical, postpropositional, postliberal, postconservative, postsecular, post-Christian, post-?” To be convincing, theology undertaken in such a context requires a constructive method suited to its concerns and temperament. To be truthful, it must also not shy away from critically resisting its context, where necessary. Kärkkäinen’s working definition of his method reflects this tension.

Systematic/constructive theology is an integrative discipline that continuously searches for a coherent, balanced understanding of Christian truth and faith in light of Christian tradition (biblical and historical) and in the context of historical and contemporary thought, cultures, and living faiths. It aims at a coherent, inclusive, dialogical, and hospitable vision.

Similarly to the way in which his engagement with marginalized theological voices was seen to be somewhat ambivalent, taking them seriously on the one hand but not uncritically on the other, Kärkkäinen’s method allows him to take the “‘post-’ world” seriously without necessarily requiring him to assent fully to it.

In his initial programmatic chapter on method at the beginning of volume 1 (which is summarized in a very abbreviated form at the beginning of each volume), Kärkkäinen writes that “this series continues developing ‘theological method’ incrementally, step by step, as part of the material presentation of various themes and issues.” It is not entirely clear what he means by this, since this idea is repeated in all of the introductory chapters in each volume, yet the method itself does not appear to develop in any appreciable manner from one volume to the next. The method is applied in volume 4 just as it was articulated at the start of volume 1. If, however, what he means by “development” is that the theological implications carried in the method become

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increasingly evident and more robust as the exploration unfolds, then
this is certainly the case. The overarching theological viewpoint deliv-
ered by application of his method definitely develops as the topics in
his constructive theology are addressed.

To trace just one example, Kärkkäinen argues in volume 2, as part
of his treatment of the “Triune God,” for a position he calls “classical
panentheism.” In this chapter, he deploys a sophisticated analysis of
the scriptural, patristic, medieval, and modern theological legacies to
argue that, far from being a contemporary emergence, panentheism is
a view with a deep root in Christian biblical and theological tradition.
If, Kärkkäinen argues, this classical strand of panentheistic thought—
one that balances properly God’s transcendence and immanence,
rather than sliding too far toward immanence, as he holds Schleierm-
acher, for instance, to have done—it can be a mediating position be-
tween the hyper-transcendent extreme end of some forms of classical
theism, on the one hand, and overly immanent forms of panentheism
(as in types of process thought, for example), on the other, in a way
that accords well with both the sensibilities of our time and Christian
tradition. In volume 3, Kärkkäinen develops this notion of classical
panentheism in his thinking about divine action. There, Kärkkäinen
makes the case that holding a classically panentheistic view of God
affirms God as continual creator (transcendence) and constant pre-
server (immanence) of creation, one who allows creation its proper
autonomy while still remaining present, active, and involved in the
world’s processes, in and through both their regularities and inde-
terminacies, an argument worked out in conversation with quantum
and chaos theories, among other scientific contributions. In volume
4, where Kärkkäinen is elucidating a component of his doctrine of
the Holy Spirit, he acknowledges that neither of the foregoing claims
could be made without a robust trinitarian doctrine of God that, in
accordance with both traditional and emerging feminist theologies,
and consonant with developing cosmological science, understands the
Spirit to be the life-giving and life-sustaining immanence of the God
who, while remaining transcendent, nevertheless indwells and per-
meates the whole of creation.

The unfolding of the interconnected logic of this position, which
develops over the course of three volumes, demonstrates the effec-
tiveness of Kärkkäinen’s method. I have had to move too quickly over
its particulars here to make the case fully. Even so, I hope it is clear
that, while the method itself has not changed, its implications have
become more evident. We can see at each step a balance between
tradition and contemporary context and engagement with a variety of
conversation partners from diverse sectors (including other religions,
which were not mentioned here, though Kärkkäinen clarifies these
positions with reference to them). And, as each step builds on the
previous and leads to the next, the overall effectiveness of the method
in constructing a viable theology for the “post-’ world” becomes in-
creasingly visible.

This only makes good sense, for several reasons. Kärkkäinen’s co-
herence theory of truth demands it, for one thing. For another, he
seeks not only coherence but to evaluate the truth claims of theo-
logical propositions in a way that, in his view, many nonfoundation-
als and the Radically Orthodox shy away from doing, as they both
generally accept traditional theological propositions as intrasystemic
“rules” for the faith without much further ado. In making his case
for the interconnected conceptions of classical panentheism, a robust
but preliminary conception of divine action, and a full articulation
of pneumatology, Kärkkäinen tests his theological views against not
only scripture and tradition, but the insights of the natural sciences
into the conditions of creation and of other faiths on similar issues,
arriving at conclusions that are appropriate to our time and place and
that are also persuasive rather than doctrinaire.²⁸ As Kärkkäinen un-
derstands it, truth can only convince, it cannot demonstrate with the
certainty of proof. This is because truth is an eschatological reality.²⁹
While knowledge and history are still ongoing, unfinished processes,
truth is something we need to claim humbly and hospitably, as we
can and will be limited by our finite perspectives and our theologies
will always stand in need of revision. The suggestive, searching, and
sincere tone of Kärkkäinen’s important work exemplifies the wisdom
of this method and of taking this approach.

These are books of technical, academic theology that are best
engaged by readers with a working knowledge of the terms, concepts,
figures, and movements of the Christian theological heritage. They
could be used with great profit in advanced seminars on specific theo-
logical topics such as Christology or Trinity or soteriology.

I await the final volume of Kärkkäinen’s systematic/constructive
theology, Community and Hope, with great anticipation. This is not

²⁸ Kärkkäinen, Christ and Reconciliation, 33.
²⁹ Kärkkäinen, Christ and Reconciliation, 9, 15.
only because my own work is situated at the nexus of church and eschatology, the two themes of the final volume, but also because it will be a great pleasure to observe and learn from how Kärkkäinen brings the ideas he has been developing over the course of the first four books to conclusion. Given what he has produced so far, it is a good bet that there are not only more provocative ideas coming but even more evidence that Kärkkäinen’s constructive method deserves to become a noted and influential one.