

Chapter 17

Everything is Everything

Reevaluating Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen's "Theology of Everything" and Social Location

Jason S. Sexton

Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen is one of the most prolific evangelical scholars writing in the English language today. His most recent crowning accomplishment, the five-volume work published by Eerdmans, *A Constructive Christian Theology for the Pluralistic World*, offers a 2,199-page literary smorgasbord through the panoply of Christian doctrine, incorporating questions he believes that Christian theology should be dealing with today. Framed according to traditional theological categories, the series goes a long way in its wide-ranging inquiry, and does so in conversation with significant interlocutors while engaging some of the most recent findings he draws out from other academic disciplines that Christian theology must grapple with in the early twenty-first century.

Several English-speaking evangelical theologians have set out to complete projects like this, and some have even finished major systematic projects of multivolume breadth. See, for example, the work of the late Thomas C. Oden and his three-volume systematic theology, which was only a portion of his pioneering work, especially of historical and international retrieval, and expressly rooted in Africa. There's also Alister E. McGrath's three-volume *Scientific Theology*, also published by Eerdmans, which arises from his vast range of literary output, yet with a bit more rigor than the rest of the volumes, with a few exceptions. Several other theologians have attempted major tasks only to leave them incomplete. For example, the late John Webster attempted an ambitious multivolume work, a portion of which may yet see the light of day. And perhaps most ambitious of a programmatic publication agenda, similar to the range of Wolfhart Pannenberg's literary corpus, was found in

the proposed six-volume series by Stanley J. Grenz, which ultimately only saw two volumes published, with the last one posthumous. Next to these, Kärkkäinen has actually completed the longest and most perambulatory treatment of the systematic loci that has ever been given in English.

English is not Kärkkäinen's first language. After his growing up years in Finland, he started his career there, and later spent three teaching years in Bangkok, Thailand. It is difficult to say just how much the Finnish context and his own evolving Lutheran and Pentecostal ecclesial identities (not to mention catholic and ecumenical) shape his theology, but he maintains ongoing institutional identity there at the University of Helsinki as Docent of Ecumenics, and his ongoing role as a pastor in a Finnish Lutheran congregation in Los Angeles grounds him in the global Finnish experience. But I have often wondered how much his arrival in Los Angeles has shaped his outlook. After taking the MA in Theological Studies at Fuller Seminary in 1989, he returned to Fuller as associate professor of systematic theology in 2000. The move to Southern California, and Fuller in particular, certainly helped enable his prolific writing career. But to what degree did this move inspire his extensive and masterful project?

One might hypothesize that the multicultural context of Los Angeles and the generally open exploratory posture of Fuller provided a catalyst and space for this work to be completed in the timely manner that it was, with roughly one 400-page volume completed each year from 2013 to 2017. Such an accomplishment, unprecedented in the field of contemporary English-speaking theology, flows with the same output of his other projects, meaning that this work built upon the breadth of his engagement reflected in various introductory survey volumes that explore doctrines like the Trinity, pneumatology, ecclesiology, and so on, in ecumenical, international, and contextualized perspectives, published by the range of evangelical academic publishing houses like Baker, InterVarsity, and Westminster John Knox.

I have often wondered to what degree *California* might mark the five-volume series or any part of Kärkkäinen's other work. While the question may remain a matter of consideration by later cultural theologians, it has special relevance when considering the missiological nature of his work, since there's no question that he also is explicit about all theology being "contextual." Consulting him once (or twice) about my own work on theology of California, manifesting in several collaborative meetings throughout the state and one collected volume so far,¹ and also soliciting his participation in the project's efforts, he remarked something about not having much to offer since he was merely an aging white European male. Perhaps. Pressing him further might have revealed his perception of the need of a wide range of actors who knew California better than he did as a newcomer, and that any truly California theology would need to incorporate and develop descriptions

and visions of multigenerational Californians like Russell Jeung² or Robert Chao Romero,³ outliers to a lot of the “normal” white-centric North American evangelical theology.

Other than how Fuller’s institutional structure allowed him to write at the speedy pace he did, then, accompanied with Fuller’s own rapid internal editorial mechanism, one would be hard-pressed to locate anything particularly *Californian* at all about Kärkkäinen’s work. He has left practically no literary or theological footprint here, and it is difficult to tell how the place has influenced him, if it has at all. In fact, to showcase his credibility as one engaging a kind of global theology, I once heard him invoke his time teaching in Bangkok. But I never heard him do this for California, raising the question whether he is conscious of how place actually has shaped his theology. There does not seem to be much evidence for his thinking of this at all, notwithstanding a significant work commute time into Pasadena from his Palm Springs home, where he would return along the San Bernardino Mountains before going through the San Gorgonio Pass in the shadow of Mount San Jacinto while dropping back into the Coachella Valley. Kärkkäinen has actually been deeply immersed in place, even while serving as pastor to the local Finnish congregation, and teaching his many students who called Los Angeles their home.

The kind of theology on offer, though, nevertheless claims to be from the ground, with the people, missiological in nature and attuned to pretty much everything—global, across the atlas, in the university laboratories, and on the streets. This effort can be seen in its posture of listening to other voices from other traditions (and religions) and from any relevant academic discipline on any point, maintaining sensitivity to truth whatsoever and against oppressive norms in favor of a liberationist impulse. Here is where he finds feminist, Black, and Latino liberationist theologies helpful, especially for their readings of Scripture (II:44–60). While Kärkkäinen later posits overcoming racism as a theological task (III:439–446) and the prioritization of the marginalized “other,” and while James Cone is invoked in important places throughout several volumes with regard to matters of liberation, a doctrine of creation, humanity, and whiteness, the project overall doesn’t grapple sufficiently with weaknesses of American theology and its legacy. Nor does it consider how the work of Willie James Jennings⁴ and other statements of Black theology might inform doctrines of creation, anthropology, among others. Jennings effort to address the whiteness (and white supremacy) of the legacy of American theology makes room for is a significant project that has potential to entirely reshape the field of American theology and American theological institutions.⁵

Kärkkäinen could have engaged the American (or California) dream as one of the most important cultural questions in the contemporary world, both

for those within the United States and elsewhere, and the supposed truth of this dominant myth. A comparative theology if there ever was one. But as far as I can tell, he never took it on. This is not insignificant, since just in 2004, there seemed to have been some trouble with his U.S. residency situation. Presumably with the support of other colleagues, the late Stanley Grenz wrote to the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, commending Kärkkäinen, who in Grenz's estimation is "an outstanding professor in the field of theology and therefore whose future employment in the United States will surely benefit our nation." He concluded the letter with the following:

Dr. Kärkkäinen is truly among the leading and most promising theologians in the world today. For this reason, I strongly and without reservation recommend Dr. Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen for lawful permanent residence in the United States. I am convinced that he is a person whose employment will continue to benefit this country greatly.⁶

Rather than engagement with this troubled land wherein Kärkkäinen found himself wanting to be, however, he kept his interest fixed tightly on the theology cultivated in post-World War II continental Europe. Wolfhart Pannenberg and Jürgen Moltmann supplied much of the intellectual underpinnings of his work, making it embrace of a kind of panentheism, unsurprisingly, especially with how this enables sensitivity to issues from the tradition (classical concepts of infinity and simplicity, for example) and the contemporary experience, as well as what might be made of the relationship between theology and science.

Perhaps due to the pressures of doing theology in a major German university after the war, Pannenberg's methodology led him effectively to subject theology to the findings of the other disciplines. Kärkkäinen did not do this, which may have been the result of having less pressure (or different kinds) than Pannenberg did in his context. Or perhaps not working primarily in a university provided some relief. But borrowing from Pannenberg nevertheless for his deeply Trinitarian posture, Kärkkäinen's work sees God unequivocally as the all-determining reality, a claim sufficient for doing his work within the safe walls of an independent theological seminary.

Kärkkäinen's work, including his five-volume project, is a self-proclaimed exercise of comparative theology, developing a constructive Christian theological vision in dialogue with the Christian tradition, the sciences, contemporary theology in its global and contextual diversity, and with theological concepts (as it were) in Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism, highlighting our current situation in today's religiously pluralist and secular society. The focused attention on the doctrinal loci of each of the five volumes underscores the systematic nature of the project, and its distinction from any

“Comparative *Religions*” emphasis that has occupied the American university Religion departments for the last few decades but now is going away.⁷

Contrasting his efforts to classical liberal and postliberal approaches, in the first volume’s “Introduction,” Kärkkäinen explains: “The present work argues that it belongs to the nature and inner structure of Christian theology to pursue the truth of its statements if it is based on the conviction that its ‘object’ is God and everything in relation to God” (I:11). This is not dissimilar to definitions of theology as conceived by Webster, Grenz, or even Pannenberg, whom Kärkkäinen draws most heavily from throughout his work, not unlike the late Stanley Grenz, although perhaps with a bit less critical reception than is found in Grenz. And yet, Kärkkäinen is working in a setting that grapples with considerations not necessarily on Grenz’s radar, and most certainly is in a much different situation than Pannenberg as a Lutheran theologian working in the German university during the postwar context. But regarding this “objectivity,” Kärkkäinen fails to address how this kind of “science” of “objectivity,”⁸ and even various scientific assumptions especially with purported absence of bias that contemporary science is well known for, may very well be wrong, and even propagative of bad ideas that theology inherently rejects.

Kärkkäinen is acutely aware of interreligious (as well as ecumenical) and interdisciplinary conversations happening throughout the wider world of discourse, which highlights the comparative nature of his series in ways that, following Francis X. Clooney, allows for “theologies” from elsewhere (religious traditions and other ultimate claims coming from fields like modern science) to weigh in with their claims standing in contestable relationship to Christianity. This is also similar to Pannenberg in many ways and his erstwhile approach to the history of religions school. Yet Kärkkäinen’s approach goes beyond allowing other religions’ theologies their contestable space, finding them raising important questions (with their respective epistemologies, languages, and orderings) that Christianity has not considered adequately. In this sense, Kärkkäinen’s approach reflects a much older, stranger way of doing theology that can be seen happening in the first century and throughout the Christian tradition when it was not the dominant religion, or like Aquinas and Islamic theology.

As such, the posture of Kärkkäinen’s theology exhibits a remarkable beauty, skill, and breadth that spends a great deal of time articulating other views while weaving his own constructive narrative through each volume, offering a kind of postfoundational Christian theology for the current moment. Of course, with any lengthy wading into other worldviews, offering robust descriptions of their contours and claims, one may wonder where theology ends and begins amid the process of listening to other traditions. And yet, this outlook and attitude right away seems foreign to a Western

missionary impulse (especially among evangelicals), which proceeds with a general hastiness to proclaim, even before the relevant questions and receptor language have been adequately grasped. Here, Kärkkäinen shows his methodological and missiological genius.

If there is any weakness in this theology beyond what I have already pointed to it may be that the effort does not ever quite lock into any careful biblical exegesis for the formulation of its statements, and especially for the overall constructive project. Perhaps Kärkkäinen is not a constructive theologian at all, and has no project that he is actively trying to envision and articulate, which might mean that he has forfeited a potential prophetic role that a theologian might have (especially with his range of knowledge). Instead, it is not the theologian's voice that he elevates; any prophetic role is left to the church, especially in its institutional structuring. But is this prophetic enough? And what about when the church becomes apostate, as in the case of the situation in Nazi Germany? And in whatever situation, how does Scripture remain as the "ultimate" norm of theology? (II:89–95). Where does its voice cut through the terrain in the analytic or constructive effort? Perhaps one might say that Kärkkäinen's exegesis is a reception project, finding Scripture rattling around in the tradition. But then what about the liberationist traditions that enable new peoples (and those who have had Christianity and the Bible for some time) to see things afresh, reading the Bible anew, encountering the relational beauty, power, wonder of revelation once again while disrupting the status quo? More personally, what is the Bible saying to Veli-Matti in this current moment? What is it saying to Fuller Seminary and its administrative and faculty leadership? It seems to me that any truly evangelical theology will be much more interested in such questions as these rather than what other religions, for example, are saying in the current moment.

I first met Veli-Matti in 2007 after I finished a ThM at a conservative theological seminary in Los Angeles and was starting to think I would pursue doctoral work. I was captivated by the doctrine of the Trinity (and how little of it I had been taught) after beginning to read Stanley Grenz and T. F. Torrance. After I laid my hands on and devoured Kärkkäinen's global survey of doctrines of the Trinity,⁹ I actually thought I might study with him in this endeavor. A European scholar versed in Pannenberg, Moltmann, global Evangelicalism, and so on, would surely give me the kind of well-rounded guidance that would help me to become a better thinker and minister of the Gospel in California, I thought. After a brief meeting in his office, experiencing the gracious hospitality of the well-tanned Scandinavian now much relaxed by the California sun, and after I completed the GRE and other requirements necessary to apply to graduate work at Fuller, I applied to work with him. I hoped to study the doctrine of the Trinity and North American Evangelicalism, theological methodology and culture, Stanley Grenz, and

those who treated Grenz with contempt during a strange moment of North American evangelical history. But I didn't get into Fuller. I didn't get into any North American institutions with a serious doctoral program in theology. Instead I went to St. Andrews.

When I arrived in Scotland to study at St. Andrews, I did not read much of Kärkkäinen's work. Perhaps an article or review here or there. But he did not slow down, and so I read the five volumes in the Eerdmans series as they released. But otherwise I was too busy reading Stanley Grenz and the other big thinkers in Trinitarian theology during my doctoral studies, and then far too busy getting my mind around California literature, and issues related to arguably the most significant social and moral issue of our day (an issue that no evangelical institution has taken seriously): mass incarceration.¹⁰ Yet Kärkkäinen continued writing his books in his own clear and perambulatory style. And he continued with his theology of everything (insofar as one can engage "everything"), which as such claims to widely map the field (of everything) like no other theologian has done, perhaps ever, in big history fashion. But, *everything?*

Kärkkäinen's theology of everything, while it lands definitely on many questions raised in its pages, also offers a theology of both/and, which ironically may be helpful, and may not be. On a number of points, it actually ends up largely skirting big issues, like the current environmental crisis, the future of [theological] higher education, the fundamental nature of human desire, along with questions of sexuality and sexual orientation, among others. Focusing on the things that he did meant that he would consequently blowing past (off?) some of the most significant things happening today. A more modest approach might suggest that it is actually much easier and perhaps more responsible to have a theology of just three things. But even there, as the old adage goes: a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush. Trying everything might actually result in a theology of nothing. Or nothing of significance.

I do not think this is the case with Kärkkäinen's theology. I think it offers much. But it could have offered much more. It could have, for example, helped Fuller sort through issues of race and sexuality as they have raged within the institution over the last several years, leading to student uprisings and a handful of faculty firings and student expulsions. At the 2018 Tyndale Fellowship at Wolfson College, Cambridge, which set out to review Kärkkäinen's five-volume series, in the midst of a session with Veli-Matti responding to questions, as cochair of the study group I asked him why he never addressed the issue of same-sex unions. His response, very carefully crafted, was effectively to resign to take the position of his employer, Fuller Seminary, on the matter, conceding that the position of the institution would define his own. One NT scholar had lost his job amid turmoil resulting from internal pressure from a small group of colleagues who could not tolerate his

presence after he had come out (in print) in support of the LGBTQ community. This is especially awkward when Fuller has board members (and loyal alumni) who fully support and celebrate these unions. For example, Fuller alumni Willie James Jennings writes that “gay marriage must be celebrated just as strongly, as loudly, and as intensely as any marriage of disciples, because what begins in civil toleration when touched by the Spirit of the living God becomes joyous and extravagant celebration.”¹¹ But Kärkkäinen’s position was clear: he would align with the institution, their stated position, and would not be persuaded otherwise. So much for academic and intellectual freedom.

This is all part of the unique privilege that white theology has enjoyed for so long, with white theologians situated in the safety of the fortified ivory tower. Yet any whiteness found in Kärkkäinen’s theology is hardly the fortified strange manna of “American theology.” It goes beyond the Eurocentric traditions as well (I:405). Yet on the points where it doesn’t land, constructive alternatives often are presented, in one instance even offering no resolutions to the tensions, no answers to the particular theological questions; only resistance (V:164).

It has taken me some time to consider whether this approach is indeed something other than less responsible theology, especially in the era of Black Lives Matter, and when people of color in this country are being hit hardest by the fallout from the COVID-19 pandemic, and the ongoing trauma of systemic racial oppression. But a few lines from Lauryn Hill’s “Everything is Everything” may capture some of what Kärkkäinen has tried to do:

To make a better situation
 Tomorrow, our seeds will grow
 All we need is dedication

Nobody is soon going to say to Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, “What have you done for us lately?” His work speaks volumes. And yet his paucity of attention to some of the day’s pressing issues in the North American context is not insignificant. But perhaps he saw this in advance, and knew what kind of labor and love would be required to bring about a better situation, finding it in his ecclesiastical responsibility, both to the church (as an ordained Lutheran pastor) and as a theologian, committed to the good of his institution and its role in training the next generation of evangelical clergy and laypeople. This kind of true dedication is precisely the kind that would labor to make the change happen, eventually, working with a greater vision of what theological engagement and what Christian witness look like. This does not have to be seen as a kind of complicity in the face of current forms of injustice, especially on matters of racial injustice and economic inequities. Accordingly, Kärkkäinen’s

work may have been exactly the kind of queer evangelical theology that the movement has needed in North America, or what may be deemed a bringing of space for paucity, for deeper reflection and understanding, modeling for us a way of being in the world that is attentive, gentle and nondogmatic, careful and kind, slow to speak, and yet unambiguously present.

During my time as cochair of the Evangelical Studies group at AAR, there's hardly been a time where we haven't had some kind of proposal from Kärkkäinen, or at least his presence and involvement in our efforts somehow. It is usually as he is traveling from one place to another (almost always with his beloved wife Anne, whom I suspect is the secret to the wisest and best parts of Kärkkäinen's theology), his doctoral students almost always present. Whether at AAR or in Cambridge at the Tyndale Fellowship study group meetings, he's often coming directly from his work in Helsinki, or from some other ecumenical responsibilities he has taken on. His indefatigable spirit and deep dedication to his calling has not only generated some of the highest literary output in the evangelical theological world, but it has also meant that Kärkkäinen has produced some of the most interesting work happening today in evangelical theology, serving the churches as they reconsider how best to embody the Gospel better than they have before, and helping them better formulate their message for the contemporary world.

NOTES

1. Fred Sanders and Jason S. Sexton, eds., *Theology and California: Theological Refractions on California's Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2014).

2. See Russell M. Jeung, *At Home in Exile: Finding Jesus among My Ancestors and Refugee Neighbors* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016); and Russell M. Jeung, *Sustaining Faith Traditions: Race, Ethnicity and Religion Among the Latino and Asian American Second Generation* (New York: New York University Press, 2012).

3. See Robert Chao Romero, *Brown Church: Five Centuries of Latina/O Social Justice, Theology, and Identity* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2020).

4. For example, see Willie James Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2011).

5. See Willie James Jennings, "Can White People Be Saved? Reflections on the Relationship of Missions and Whiteness," in *Can "White" People Be Saved? Triangulating Race, Theology, and Mission*, edited by Love L. Sechrest, Johnny Ramírez-Johnson, and Amos Yong (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2018), 27–43.

6. Letter from Stanley Grenz to the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, October 11, 2004, from Stanley J. Grenz's personal files (see Stanley Grenz Fonds in the Archives and Special Collections of the John Richard Allison Library, Regent College, Vancouver, BC, used by permission).

7. While comparative religions courses are still taught, their dominance over departments (to be egalitarian, perhaps) has waned. For example, the Boston University Religion department has chosen a distinct humanities emphasis, stating “Boston University’s Graduate Program in Religion is the new university home for the advanced humanistic study of religion.” In addition, California State University, Fullerton, where I taught for several years fresh out of my doctoral studies, has changed its departmental name from Comparative Religion to Religious Studies, following a common trend in the United States.

8. See, for example, Sandra Harding, *Objectivity and Diversity: Another Logic of Scientific Research* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2015).

9. Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *The Trinity: Global Perspectives* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2017).

10. See, for example, Jason S. Sexton, “Experiencing Justice from the Inside Out: Theological Considerations about the Church’s Role in Justice, Healing, and Forgiveness,” *Religions* 10/2 (2019): 108; Jason S. Sexton, “Redeemed on the Inside: Radical Accounts of Ecclesia Incarcerate,” *Ecclesial Practices* 5/2 (December 2018): 172–190; Jason S. Sexton, “Toward a Theology of California’s Ecclesia Incarcerate,” *Theology* 118.2 (March/April 2015): 83–91.

11. See, for example, Willie James Jennings, *Acts: A Theological Commentary on the Bible. Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2017), 60.