

Non-Western Theology, Part 2 – The Stress in Letting the “Kids” Grow Up

Colleagues:

Last week's posting on non-western theology reminded me that a few months ago (September 2000) the Vatican generated a bit of a brouhaha with its Declaration on Ecumenism and Interreligious Dialogue titled “Dominus Iesus” [Lord Jesus]. Non-Roman Christian communities were reminded of their inadequate claim to being fully “church,” and world religions beyond the Christian faith didn't get very friendly treatment either.

In the ensuing damage control Rome said “Dominus Iesus” was intended as an in-house document, and that it was speaking primarily to Third-world Roman theologians who had gone beyond the pale in their efforts to link the Christian faith to local contexts and cultures. Granted that as the Gospel has expanded into non-Western worlds, the chances for heresy, syncretism, false gospels, and what-not has also expanded. At root it is no different from the era when the Gospel moved from Jerusalem, to Judea, to Samaria, and on into the rest of the world. In those early centuries (and also in the subsequent ones in the West) heresy, syncretism, false gospels, and what-not also abounded.

The 16th century Reformation arose from such a state of affairs in late Medieval Europe. Then as now the issue was: which contexted gospel – Rome's or the Reformulators' – was the genuine one. The Roman church at that time sought to cope with the Lutheran “heresy” in much the same way that “Dominus Iesus” does—decreeing it to be a no-no and calling for obedience because “Rome has spoken; the case is closed.” It didn't work then, and most likely it won't work now. The Reformation-era confessors proposed another way to deal with

heresy—not coercion but conversation—allowing the “best” Gospel to win by articulating its own winsome power of persuasion.

Even insiders are telling Rome that “Dominus Iesus” was a mistake. One such is the Missionswissenschaftliches Institut – Missio [MWI] in Aachen, Germany. Its English name is “Institute of Missiology Missio.” By virtue of my own dabbling in missiology I know some folks at MWI and so I’m on their mailing list. MWI is one of the cutting-edge RC agencies for mission research. Below is what they posted last October.

Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

**From: Institute of Missiology – Missio Aachen,
October 2000**

Subject: Declaration to “Dominus Iesus”

Dear Friends and Colleagues,

You are all aware that the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith of the Catholic Church, under the guidance of Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger has published on September 5th of this year a Declaration on Ecumenism and Interreligious Dialogue. The Declaration is titled: “Dominus Iesus – On the Unicity [= uniqueness] and Salvific Universality of Jesus Christ and the Church”. You must also be aware of the many different reactions it has caused worldwide.

We at the Institute of Missiology Missio e.V. (MWI) in Aachen-Germany have been dealing during the last 30 years with the issues of contextual theologies, interreligious dialogue in different cultural and geographic contexts, as well as with theology of religions. During these years we were able to establish a wide network of relationships with our partner

theologians in the South and with quite a good number of theological institutions. This network enables us to document the different developments in theological thinking in the Universal Church and to make available the results to scholars all over the world.

The present declaration (see attachment) of the MWI takes up only that part of the Roman Declaration which deals with interreligious dialogue and theology of religions (the wider ecumenism), but not with intra-Christian ecumenism. May I ask you to take note of this declaration and – if you are publisher of a journal – to publish it.

Thank you very much.

Yours sincerely

Dr. Josef Estermann, Director
Institute of Missiology Missio

Statement of the Institute of Missiology Missio regarding “Dominus Iesus”

For nearly thirty years the Institute of Missiology Missio in Aachen has been following the emergence of contextual and inculturated theological reflection within the Churches in Africa, Asia, Latin America and Oceania. This has been done by publications like the bibliography “Theology in Context” and the “Yearbook of Contextual Theologies.” With these publications we have tried to document the theological work done and to foster dialogue among these theologians themselves and with their colleagues in Europe and North America. During these years we have been privileged to assist in the training of young students who specialize in the various theological and philosophical fields, to help in the build-up of theological

institutions and to become partners in their theological reflections.

It is out of this longstanding relationship of partnership and friendship that we feel obliged to defend their freedom and their right to do original theological research within their contexts by making use of the cultural and religious heritage and applying new theological methods in the process. It is our impression that the recently published declaration “Dominus Iesus” by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF) is not doing justice to the serious theological reflection done, especially by theologians from Asia, but also from the other continents, in the fields of christology, pneumatology, ecclesiology and theology of religions.

This is not to deny that in the process of taking up the new challenges posed by religious pluralism there have been theories advanced which are deficient and not fully compatible with Catholic tradition. The intention, therefore, to “set forth again the doctrine of the Catholic faith in these areas,” and “to refute specific positions that are erroneous or ambiguous” which is the professed aim of the document “Dominus Iesus,” is generally justified. But even if one acknowledges the real danger e.g., of religious relativism and false positions regarding the salvific value of other religious faiths and the place of the founders of these religions within the history of salvation, there remains the question, whether the language employed by the CDF and the general accusations are appropriate, charitable and helpful in the present circumstances. The many negative reactions inside and outside the Catholic Church in response to the declaration show that the content and the language employed has hurt the feelings of many and been the cause for many misgivings and misunderstandings.

1. *The public character of statements by Roman dicasteries [= the canon law term for courts adjudicating debates within the church] regarding other religions* The assumption that statements by a Roman dicastery are only intended for internal information within the Church is contradicted when the publication of such a document is accompanied by public presentation in a news conference and coverage in the international press and other media throughout the world. When the saying is true that "There can be no peace in the world unless there is peace among the religions," then statements referring to other religions and their "value" have to be considered not only according to theological tenets found in Catholic tradition of old, but must be considered in today's context of the worldwide efforts to reduce tensions and of religious pluralism where many Catholic Churches, especially in Asia, find themselves as minorities in the midst of religious traditions which are proud and conscious of their spiritual and religious heritage and which resent very much to be looked down on by a Catholic faith claiming absolute superiority over all other traditions.

The vast political and ideological implications of the declaration "Dominus Iesus" in many countries of Asia and elsewhere, where Christian minorities are under attack, obviously have not been sufficiently taken into account. In India, the media stated that the Vatican declaration on Christ's uniqueness threatens interreligious dialogue and communal peace in the country. The journalists accuse the Catholic Church of using "double talk" when on the one hand the Catholic Church is presenting itself as having basically changed its attitude and theology towards the other religions, which should not be seen purely as a device to readjust the missionary strategy of

old to the changed conditions of today. The way the present pope makes it a custom to meet with the members of other religions, wherever he goes during his many pastoral visits and the policy of sending greetings to the major feasts of Judaism, Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism by the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, and the many local encounters and dialogues in different parts of the world, seem to give credence to this new attitude towards the other religions. The confession of guilt at the beginning of Lent and the many impressive gestures by John Paul II during his visit to Israel were recognized and appreciated worldwide.

The content and the tone of the recent Roman document, however, seem on the other hand to belie all these initiatives and claims to having changed, because it presents the Christian claim to absolute truth and fullness of revelation in Jesus Christ and the unique position of the Roman Catholic Church in such an absolutist way that dialogue becomes impossible.

2. Legitimacy of plurality in theological reflection within the World Church
The issue at stake with the document of the CDF is whether the great plurality in the content and methodology in theological reflection, which has developed in recent years, can be considered to be a legitimate expression of the emergence of a World Church since Vatican II. There is a general agreement that the development of the Catholic Church into a true world Church can be considered to be the specific characteristic significance of Vatican II in the history of the Catholic Church which exists as a communion of local Churches, engaged in dialogue with different cultural and religious traditions and secular ideologies and which respond in their own way to the theological and

philosophical problems in their contexts. The present conflict with the forces of the world-wide globalization in the fields of economy, trade, information technology and other fields there poses the challenge for the Churches in different regions to preserve the authenticity of local traditions and regional diversity, not the least in being Church. When looking for answers in Divine revelation to these questions, they will also have recourse to the sources and resources of the cultural and religious traditions of their particular contexts.

The richness of the Catholic Church in the past and present consists in the ability to accommodate the variety, plurality and diversity of the many traditions within the unity of one Church. When Vatican II opened the way to celebrate the divine liturgy in the many vernacular languages, this was an acknowledgment of the fact that the Paschal mystery can and has to be expressed in the language of the people celebrating it. In the field of theology, too, there was the realization that no longer only one form of Catholic theology should be normative for all theological reflection within the different regions of the Catholic Church. The ensuing boom in the development of contextual and inculturated theologies like the different forms of Liberation Theologies, firstly in Latin America and then in other continents as well, the emergence of African forms of inculturated theologies and the many contributions by Asian theologians show a remarkable richness and fertility of theological reflection.

3. Orthodoxy and/or OrthopraxisThe Vatican document lacks completely any reference to the poor and the “fundamental option for the poor” which have shaped so much of the

theological reflection and concrete action within the Churches of the so-called Third World during the last decades. The stress on the purely doctrinal and dogmatic aspects of the Christian faith results in a presentation of the Good News brought by Jesus of Nazareth which is devoid of any reference and relevance for the concrete lives of the faithful. Did Jesus Christ really only come into this world to claim to be the “only saviour”, to bring the “fullness of revelation” and to entrust solely the Roman Catholic Church with the legacy of a “*depositum fidei*” [faith-deposit], understood in the terms of Papal infallibility?

In Asian theology we find an approach to divine revelation which is shaped by a sense of the sacred, filled with a spirit of awe when confronted with the divine mystery and respectful of the many manifestations of the work of the Holy Spirit in the sacred writings, rituals and traditions of the other religions. Asian Christians consider the values and teachings contained in these religions to be part and parcel of their own religious and cultural tradition. They do not want to break the communion with their ancestors but understand their own decision to accept Jesus Christ as their saviour as continuation of a spiritual bond with the world of their ancestors and not as a total break with a past which has to be discarded, because it is in contradiction to basic Christian tenets of faith.

In the preparation and holding of the Asian Synod in Rome in 1998 the Asian bishops witnessed to the specific Asian approach to evangelization, interreligious dialogue and being minority Churches amidst religious pluralism. They expounded the “gradual way” of presenting Jesus Christ in Asian garb by showing him as preaching in parables,

healing the sick and bringing the Good News to the poor and outcast in order to enter into dialogue with members of other faiths. To confess Jesus Christ as the only saviour will then constitute the end of a conversion process with the help of the Spirit as faith statement within the believing community of the Church.

4. *Danger of a new rites controversy?* The Roman document gives the impression that the richness of theological pluralism is seen solely as a threat to theological orthodoxy and faithfulness to Catholic tradition. On the one hand the document admits that religious pluralism, the problem of the theological function of other religions, their sacred scriptures and the place of the founders of these religions constitute new areas of theological research and a wide field for fresh theological reflection. But at the same time the document seems to refute nearly all theological advances made during the last 30 years by theologians in Asia, Africa and Latin America as incompatible with Catholic orthodoxy.

The sweeping condemnations of the reflections and writings by many theologians in Asia and elsewhere in the fields of christology, pneumatology, revelation and ecclesiology hurt and discourage the many theologians who have been working for years in contact and dialogue with the religious leaders and the religious traditions in their countries. The sharp distinction between "theological faith" as response to divine revelation, solely to be found in the Christian tradition, and "belief" as response to human religious experiences, found in all other religions, is endangering a meaningful interreligious dialogue and hurts the feeling of the believers in all other religions.

5. *Plea for more dialogue and exchange* With this statement we would like to make a call to a renewed discussion among theologians, local and regional bishop conferences as well as with the dicasteria of the Roman Curia to explore the “vast field” of open fundamental questions in the fields of interreligious dialogue, christology, ecclesiology and pneumatology. There is an urgent need to find new ways to safeguard the freedom of theological research in response to the different cultural, religious and socio-economic contexts and at the same time to respect the duty of the magisterium [= Rome’s doctrinal monitors] to critically evaluate the results of this theological reflection in order to preserve the unity in concordance with the faith tradition within the world Church. The MWI will continue making efforts in fostering and inspiring intercultural exchange.

Aachen, October 2000

“P.S. For visual samples of non-western Christian theology GO to the webpage of the Asian Christian Art Association www.asianchristianart.org and enjoy.”

Cheers!

Ed Schroeder