Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered: The Myth of a Pluralistic Theology of Religions ed. by Gavin D'Costa (review)

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ing should gravitate, it is no wonder that many say: "There are no clear answers." Finally, I wonder if casuistry can even deal with the most significant ethical issue facing medicine in the immediate future: The construction of a system in the United States which will provide adequate health care for all citizens.

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Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered: The Myth of a Pluralistic Theology of Religions. Edited By GAVIN D'COSTA. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1990. Pp. xii + 218. $16.95 (paper).

There are two ways of reading this remarkably stimulating collection of essays. At one level it is a vigorous rebuttal of an earlier book in the "Faith Meets Faith Series" entitled *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness: Toward a Pluralistic Theology of Religions,* edited by John Hick and Paul Knitter; D'Costa's sub-title, "The Myth of a Pluralistic Theology of Religions," is a conscious polemical riposte. On the second level it purports to propose an alternative theology of religions which would on the one hand retain the claim of Christian uniqueness but on the other be not exclusivistic but genuinely pluralistic and, therefore, fruitful for interreligious dialogue. In my judgment, the book achieves its first objective well, furnishing an impressive array of counter-arguments to the pluralistic thesis. Indeed, like a swarm of tacklers ganging up on the hapless quarterback, so many contributors attack the same points of the pluralistic proposal that readers must have the impression of witnessing an overkill. On the other hand, the book's positive construction of a theology of religions suffers from vagueness and even internal contradictions. It is a classical case of people banding together because they know what they are against (in this case, the proposal to regard all religions as equally valid ways of salvation, with none allowed to claim superiority and exclusiveness) but not yet able to determine what they are for (except to retain the claim of Christian uniqueness).

The volume contains 14 essays divided into three groups. The first three discuss the implications of the Christian doctrine of the Trinity for interreligious dialogue (Rowan Williams, Gavin D'Costa, and Christoph Schwöbel); the next five explore the relevance of christology in the context of religious pluralism (M. M. Thomas, Francis X. Clooney, John B. Cobb, Jr., Wolfhart Pannenberg, and Monika Hell-

wig); the last six examine the epistemological and hermeneutical issues of religious pluralism (J. A. DiNoia, Lesslie Newbigin, Jürgen Moltmann, Paul J. Griffith, John Milbank, and Kenneth Surin). The editor has done an excellent job of summarizing the main points of each essay; it is therefore unnecessary to replicate his effort. My intention in this review is not to examine each essay individually; space would not permit such an undertaking. Rather I shall list the major criticisms made by the contributors against the pluralistic thesis and then examine their rather diverse positive proposals.

Before doing so, however, it would be useful to describe briefly the essential thesis of *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness*, which is under attack. Its contributors argue that due to the rise of historical consciousness, the nature of God as Absolute Mystery, and the obligation to promote peace and justice, the Christian claim to uniqueness and superiority as a way to salvation should be abandoned. Instead of the exclusivist and inclusivist theologies of religions, they propose the pluralist position that Christianity is one among the many religions, equally valid and mutually complementary.

What do the contributors to *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered* find wrong with this pluralist thesis? A complete list of their objections cannot be furnished here, but these are some of the more important ones. First, the pluralists are as imperialistic as the exclusivists and inclusivists they denounce because they impose their (Western) notions of religion, dialogue, social justice, and so on, on other religionists (D'Costa, Newbigin, Griffiths). Hence the pluralist thesis is logically incoherent. Secondly, the pluralists wrongly presume that there is such a thing as a common core of religious experience which functions as a genus of the different species of religions (Newbigin, Milbank, Cobb). Thirdly, pluralists neglect the social and historical particularities of all religions and therefore fail to take their doctrines, texts, and practices seriously (Milbank, DiNoia, Clooney, Surin). Fourthly, pluralists fail to understand the aims and forms of life of religious communities (DiNoia) and the different functions of doctrines (Griffiths). Fifthly, the pluralists' appeal to praxis inevitably leads to relativism and the rejections of the truth-claim inherent in doctrines (Newbigin, Pannenberg, Milbank). Sixthly, pluralists misunderstand the nature and purpose of interreligious dialogue (Moltmann, Milbank, Surin). Finally, pluralists do injustice to the meaning and practical import of some vital Christian doctrines such as the Trinity (D'Costa, Schwöbel, Williams) and christology (Hellwig, Newbigin, Cobb, Pannenberg, Thomas).

Not all of these objections are, to my mind, fatal to the pluralistic thesis, and no doubt pluralists have their own answers ready for them. Beyond defending themselves, pluralists may as well scrutinize the

coherence and merits of their opponents' positive theology of religions. As I have already mentioned, some contributors of *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered* seem to have worked at cross purposes. Three examples will suffice. First, does socio-political activism have a role to play in interreligious dialogue? An affirmative answer seems to be given by D'Costa, Schwöbel, Thomas, and Moltmann, whereas Milbank gives a resounding no (p. 185). Secondly, what is the purpose of interreligious dialogue? Di Noia and Griffiths focus on doctrines and their role in fostering a particular religious aim and form of life, whereas Surin emphasizes the particular histories, the specific social locations, and the varying practices of different religions, and Milbank bluntly says that dialogue is a work of conversion (p. 190). Thirdly, how to evaluate Raymundo Panikkar's trinitarian theology in interreligious context? Williams considers it extremely useful (with necessary corrections) whereas Milbank rejects it out of hand.

In general the book reiterates the inclusivist theology of religions without advancing it substantially, except perhaps the two essays by DiNoia and Griffiths; these propose ways of looking at the functions of doctrines and betray the influence of the so-called New Yale School, represented by George Lindbeck and William Christian. My own sympathy lies with the fundamental thrust of this book, and elsewhere I have already made similar criticisms of the pluralist thesis. My dissatisfaction with the book is that as a whole it fails to define clearly what it means by "Christian uniqueness" and hence fails to see the fundamental difference between the claim of uniqueness for Jesus and that for Christianity. The two claims are basically distinct, epistemologically, historically, ontologically, and theologically. The former is a claim of faith, the latter is a claim of fact; hence the criteria for verification are different and one can be committed to one without having to uphold the other. Without this distinction, much of the discussion on "Christian uniqueness" remains at best muddled. May I suggest that contributors to *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness* and *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered* (or at least those willing to do so) meet together and respond to each other's objections and concerns? The fact that Orbis Books published the two books in the same series augurs well for interreligious dialogue!

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