

**BOOK DISCUSSION:**  
*The Diversity of Religions*

A discussion of J. A. DiNoia's book *The Diversity of Religions: A Christian Perspective* (Washington DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1992), convened and moderated by Daniel P. Sheridan (Loyola University, New Orleans), was initiated with a brief presentation from the author, J. A. DiNoia (Dominican House of Studies). This was followed by three responses from David Burrell (Notre Dame University), Stephen Duffy (Loyola University, New Orleans), and Paul Griffiths (University of Chicago).

DiNoia began the discussion with the statement of the conviction that no helpful answers for a theology of religions can be forthcoming unless one acknowledges the profound differences among religions and among their aims. Recent attempts to reach a positive evaluation of other religions have foundered on too easy a judgment of structural and/or substantial similarity. He argues that the best way to show respect for other faiths is to accept those things that distinguish their teachings from one another. It is less important for Christian theology to allow for the salvation of people of other religions than to appreciate the distinctive goals the religions commend to their adherents and to others. This approach challenges the prevailing model of judging theologies according to whether they are exclusivist, inclusivist, or pluralist.

Burrell recalled Rahner's pointed conclusion that the new theological frontier lies not with questions of unbelief but rather with those of other beliefs. Thus far we have been unable to pose these questions properly because of an entanglement with the singularly unilluminating soteriocentric categories of "exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism." DiNoia seeks nothing less than to redirect the entire discussion by respecting the diverse aims of particular religious traditions and also by exploiting the available resources of the Christian tradition's doctrine of prospective salvation. Informed by the Christian doctrine that all human beings who have ever lived, including those who lived before the rise of the Christian community, are called prospectively to participate in a relationship of union with the triune God, DiNoia's key for a theology of religions is the logic of a nuanced a posteriori differentiation of the specific aims of the different religious traditions each of which makes particularistic claims to universality. The result, in Burrell's view, is that by "showing how conceptual clarity can contribute to the comparative elucidation of traditions, DiNoia has adumbrated one of theology's principal tasks for the future."

Duffy characterizes himself as having been both a Rahnerian inclusivist and then a Hickean pluralist. "But now the simplicity of it all appears simplistic." He has now turned in the direction to which DiNoia's book points. First, a reevaluation of exclusivism seems in order. Duffy can reappraise exclusivism for the absoluteness of its religious commitment and ultimate concern. This absoluteness suggests that we may no longer "assume" that all religions are about the same thing. It is not even clear that all religions have a soteriology. In any case such judgments can only be made after long and patient interreligious dialogue, a dialogue that a subtly colonialist inclusivism and pluralism undercut. Second, scholarly expertise in the teachings of the religions is called for. Further, Duffy hears other undercurrents in DiNoia's book: the debates between foundationalists and postliberals with DiNoia on the side of the latter. He concludes that DiNoia's work signals a major sea change in the theology of religions. A new generation of professional scholars, expert Buddhologists, Indologists, and Islamicists, do not rationalize away the differences among religions. "Their counterpoint awakens us to the possibility that there may be sand at the foundations of the exclusivism-inclusivism-pluralism paradigm." There is no need for a rush to judgment based on an easy systematization or an a priori theory construction.

In Griffiths's view, "DiNoia's work is the best and most useful statement of Christian inclusivism that I've yet seen." This is because it avoids the dangerous pitfalls of a priori theologizing. The primary pitfall is that such theologizing makes the substance of non-Christian belief and practice uninteresting. This pitfall is based on a too general use of the indicative mood. Griffiths calls for a more consistent use of the subjunctive. Indicative claims (all religions are true) must be modalized. They should be recast in terms of possibility and necessity (it is possible that all religions are true). These possibilities can be affirmed and denied only after a posteriori investigation. The teachings of the other religions then can become substantively interesting again. Griffiths suggests here that the Church might actually come to teach certain of the truths of other religions, after having recognized that the Church had not yet discovered these truths until it encountered these other religions. In Griffiths's judgment DiNoia's position is valuable because it is both seriously Christian and yet open-ended.

Griffiths notes two challenges for DiNoia. First, within the constraints of an a priori approach, it is possible that the aims of all non-Christian religions are deeply and irreducibly opposed to those of Christianity. This must be ascertained empirically. The second challenge is that, if there is only one set of actually unsurpassable and genuinely comprehensible aims, and if this belongs to the Church, then the religious aims of non-Christians may not, as DiNoia states, "be what members of that community take them to be, which is, typically, both unsurpassable and comprehensive." Griffiths says to DiNoia, "Bite the bullet: if what makes aims religious is precisely their comprehensiveness and unsurpassability, then one ought to say that all persons save Christians are mistaken in thinking they have religious aims." If this bullet is not bit, then the challenge of

systemic coherence may force a reexamination of the axiom that salvation comes always and only through the grace of Jesus Christ. Either way the substance of what other religions teach is open to and requires empirical investigation.

Several of those present challenged the view, common to all the speakers, that the theology of religions should not be based on a transcendental understanding of experience. A question was asked about "passing over" to other religions. Interesting questions were raised both about the possibility of mutually inclusive religious aims being actual and about the possibility of mutually exclusive religious aims being actual. Different religions may actually achieve different, but realizable, religious aims.

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