

COMMENTS OF ROBERT A. CATHEY

In Philip Pullman's trilogy, *The Golden Compass*, *The Subtle Knife*, and *The Amber Spyglass*, he pictures a parallel world to our own in which both the Catholic and Reformed traditions embody the evils of totalitarianism. Here's a line from *The Golden Compass*: "Ever since Pope John Calvin had moved the seat of the Papacy to Geneva and set up the Consistorial Court of Discipline, the Church's power over every aspect of life had been absolute."¹ One way to read Pullman's fictional use of Catholic and Reformed symbolism is that our two traditions together represent to the secular imagination the worst forms of intellectual, religious, and moral tyranny. The public discussion of *Dominus Iesus*² offers both Catholic and Reformed scholars an opportunity to challenge the secular assumption that we in particular are hostile to the plurality of religious traditions and aims of our local and global neighbors. Whether the theology of *DI* is adequate to the apologetic task before us is an open question.

In part 1 of my remarks, I want to explain "Why Some Protestant Pluralists Need to Read *DI*, or Saving Particularity from False Universalisms." Then in part 2, I want to argue "Why Many Secular and Religious Persons Don't Need to Firmly Believe the Propositions of *DI*: Saving the Reality of Religious Pluralism from Salvific Monism and Philosophical Pluralism from Inflated Apologetic Claims."

Part 1

WHY SOME PROTESTANT PLURALISTS NEED TO READ *DI*

1.1 Some Protestant pluralists tend to be embarrassed by the scandal of the incarnation in the son of Mary the Jew and thus water down Christian particularity for the sake of dialogue and partnership with others. *DI* returns us to the scandal.

Example: the positive reception of the Jesus Seminar by some mainline Protestant congregations and educational institutions who are much more comfortable with Jesus as a great human religious founding figure than as Savior, Messiah, Lord.

1.2 Some Protestant pluralists tend to make the U.S. model of secular religious tolerance the normative model for both Christian ecumenical and interfaith relations. They end up imposing Protestant American ethnocentrism while downplaying Catholic, Muslim, and other forms of religious internationalism which challenge the secular model. *DI* challenges this model.

¹Philip Pullman, *The Golden Compass*, His Dark Materials bk. 1 [series] (New York: Knopf, 1996) 30. (Originally published as *Northern Lights* in 1995.)

²Hereafter abbreviated *DI*. I have used the English translation of *DI* published in *Origins: CNS Documentary Service* 30/14 (14 September 2000): 209-19.

Example: Why is it that some American Protestant pluralists have so much trouble with renewed Islam today (so quick to label it fundamentalist, misogynist, theocratic, homophobic, terrorist), and yet some American Catholic pluralists do not?

Example: Why don't more Calvinists in my tradition draw the analogies between Tehran and Geneva?

1.3 Some Protestant pluralists tend to substitute interfaith experience and unaccountable theology for interfaith scholarship, critical reflection, and renewed theological exegesis of Scripture. *DI* calls for theology to be accountable for distinctive Christian doctrines.

Example: Darrell Fasching, *The Coming of the Millennium: Good News for the Whole Human Race*. Fasching argues that "the fullness of God dwells bodily in every human being who like Jesus is a son or daughter of God, for we are all sons and daughters of Adam and Eve."³ On this account any particular Christian claims for Jesus' uniqueness are sacrificed in order that Christians can affirm that we're all made in God's image because *we are all the incarnation*. This kind of exegesis and theology betrays a lack of critical accountability to the particularity of Christian claims which *DI* requires of its readers.

1.4 Whether consciously or unconsciously, some Protestant pluralists are already co-opted by global neocapitalism into a "soft" version of religious homogenization for the sake of "peace" as defined by multinational corporations, commercial networks of exchange, and the governments that serve their interests. Some Protestant pluralists have failed to critically evaluate whose power and interests are served or potentially subverted by the current popularity of interfaith work. *DI* might be used to raise the issue of whose interests are served by a certain type of religious relativism.

Example: Kenneth Surin's essay on "Religious Pluralism in the Age of the McDonald's Hamburger."⁴

Counterexample: For some Muslims in the Middle East and U.S., the purposes of dialogue are not limited to mutual understanding on a doctrinal plane. Dialogue and partnership provide opportunities to address issues of power, control of the media and territory, and to find potential allies or sympathizers in their struggles with governments like Israel, its allies, and other secular regimes.

1.5 Some Protestant pluralists tend to assume that via the ecumenical movement Catholics will evolve someday into good neoliberal Protestant types and thus they too easily take for granted Catholic ecumenical cooperation and

³Darrell J. Fasching, *The Coming of the Millennium: Good News for the Whole Human Race* (Valley Forge PA: Trinity Press International, 1996) 57.

⁴Kenneth Surin, "A 'Politics of Speech': Religious Pluralism in the Age of the McDonald's Hamburger," chap. 14 in *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered: The Myth of a Pluralistic Theology of Religions*, ed. Gavin D'Costa, Faith Meets Faith series (Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 1990).

forget the differences in our ecclesiologies, understandings of authority, and of mission. *DI* helps to underscore the differences.

A better example than *DI* in our context is Avery Dulles's essay, "*The True Church* in Dialogue with Liberal Protestantism."⁵ Dulles, the Catholic grandson, dialogues with Allen Macy Dulles, his Presbyterian grandfather and professor of Apologetics at Auburn Theological Seminary (New York), who wrote an ecclesiology entitled *The True Church*, published in 1907.

1.6 Some Protestant pluralists have yet to engage interfaith experience and partnership with the riches of trinitarian, christological, and mystical resources of the Christian traditions, esp. the Catholic and Orthodox traditions but also the Protestant family of traditions itself. *DI* offers a public example of a trinitarian and christological approach to pluralism.

Protestant Counterexample: S. Mark Heim, *The Depth of the Riches*.⁶

Part 2

WHY MANY SECULAR AND RELIGIOUS PERSONS DON'T NEED TO FIRMLY BELIEVE THE PROPOSITIONS OF *DI*

2.1 In light of Mark Heim's arguments in *Salvations* and *The Depth of the Riches*, I can imagine a devout Catholic theologian or Catholic sympathizer affirming many of the propositions that are to be "firmly believed" in *DI*, yet contextualizing those propositions amid a plurality of religious ends. That is, one could affirm much of what *DI* says about the triune character of God's salvific plan while also affirming that the messianic salvation of humanity from sin and death is not the only religious aim of the world's faith traditions.

DI reads Scripture and the Catholic doctrinal tradition as if God's only interest in creation is saving persons and societies from sin and death by calling them into relation to Jesus Christ and the Catholic Church. However, this approach ignores or downplays one of the most important insights of the comparative study of religions and interfaith work: billions of devout persons in a variety of traditions have sought and seek something fundamentally different from salvation in the Christian sense as redemption from sin and death to eternal communion with the Trinity. The religious aims of a righteous, just life in light of Torah, a life in submission to Allah, of liberation from the endless cycle of

⁵Avery Dulles, S.J., "*The True Church* in Dialogue with Liberal Protestantism," chap. 4 in *A Church to Believe In: Discipleship and the Dynamics of Freedom* (New York: Crossroad, 1982).

⁶S. Mark Heim, *The Depth of the Riches: A Trinitarian Theology of Religious Ends* (Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 2001). Also see Heim's two earlier books in a trilogy on interfaith theology: *Is Christ the Only Way?* (Philadelphia: Judson Press, 1985), in which he develops an eightfold typology of interfaith relations; *Salvations: Truth and Difference in Religion*, Faith Meets Faith series (Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 1995), where he develops a Christian philosophic theology of multiple religious ends or aims.

death and rebirth, of enlightenment on the eightfold path, of balance with the cosmos, of right relatedness to all persons and institutions, et al. distinguish and on an existential level fulfill many persons outside the bounds of Christianity. Not everyone is seeking eternal life in fellowship with the God of Jesus Christ and the Church. Unless these other and very different aims are taken seriously in their true plurality and difference from the Christian aim of salvation, then authentic interfaith dialogue, partnership, and mutual witness cannot get off the ground. Religious pluralism is real, not merely a manifestation of error, of mere belief as opposed to theological faith, or of a hidden desire that only salvation in the Catholic communion can fulfill. Until we learn to take this greater plurality with philosophical and theological seriousness, and begin to reflect on it in trinitarian, providential, and eschatological terms, we Christians run the danger once again of hunting for potential anonymous Christians in our Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, and secular neighbors.

2.2 The notion that all should firmly believe the propositions of *DI* in order to escape from the "gravely deficient situation" of mere religious belief to the "exalted condition" of grace causes me to wonder, *Where are the apologetic arguments that warrant such firm belief? It is one thing* to oppose a nihilistic relativism in philosophy or interfaith work. (Here many of us would distinguish a contextual appreciation for claims to truth and knowledge or critical realism from relativism in its most negative sense.) *It is quite another thing* to make good on the promise that the truth has been revealed to Catholics in ways that should persuade non-Catholics to desert their faith traditions or philosophies for the Catholic way.

Given the pluralism of theories of knowledge and truth, antifoundationalism, and a greater recognition of the role of context, culture, gender, etc. in the construction of paradigms of knowledge and truth, where are the Catholic arguments that would lead both Catholics and non-Catholics to the "firm beliefs" required by *DI*? The notion of firm belief or theological faith entails that Catholic scholars occupy a position of epistemic and rhetorical advantage over all others by virtue of God's grace, and that they can somehow demonstrate this epistemic superiority to non-Catholics without appeal to in-house Catholic authorities.

Yet *DI* assumes (without qualification) as fundamental to its claims about the salvific universality of Christ and the Church . . . the divine authorship of the Bible and biblical inerrancy (Section I., paragraph 8, page 213). No two claims have been more highly contested by biblical scholarship over the past two centuries than these. No two claims have more often died the death of a thousand qualifications. This is a very weak apologetic point of departure.

Once you qualify the divine authorship of the Bible with the historical and cultural knowledge of human authorship, and once you qualify the notion of "error" with the resources of philosophical and theological theories of truth and error, then you have allowed historical and cultural context to assume a role in theology that *DI* ignores. For *DI* consistently uses the proof text method of

selective biblical citation that ignores both literary and historical contexts of biblical texts.

If the Bible has multiple historical, cultural, and religious contexts of its composition and reading, then the multiple meanings of any particular citation escape the proof text method. A further implication is that Christians are now free to read the Bible as not merely the sacred writings of one religion but as a great interfaith text of Jewish, Christian, and even Islamic interpretation by way of Qur'an. The historical, literary-critical, and postmodern revolutions in biblical interpretation have opened the Bible as a site of interfaith dialogue and partnership.

These revolutions in scholarship fundamentally alter the Christian apologetic situation today if biblical texts are appealed to in order to warrant Christian claims to universal religious truth. Already and in the years ahead, the Bible will be open to multiple Jewish, Christian, and contextually conscious readings (e.g., from Asia) that will challenge the simple appeal to a few select proof texts that seem to require a Catholic salvific monism or Christian epistemic superiority. This new and promising apologetic situation calls for new approaches that *DI* forecloses prematurely. A theology of "mutual witness" across traditions involves Christians in the paradox of both passionate commitment to the God of Jesus Christ and faithful risk in the face of multiple religious aims and readings of scriptural texts, religious experiences, and institutional forms.

Let me close with two questions for our discussion.

2.3 Given the rich Catholic heritage of natural theology and philosophical reflection, why does *DI* not draw deeply on those traditions? Why does it buttress its claims by Protestant-like appeals to scripture alone thus entering upon the weak apologetic way of proof texting? For example, given the rich development of theories of analogy in Catholic scholarship, why not present "truth" as an analogical concept that requires contextual particularity for its elaboration? Doesn't philosophy provide a more useful bridge for interfaith exchange than scripture alone?

2.4 In light of the many Catholic critiques of *DI*, who speaks for the Church in ecumenical dialogue and interfaith partnership today? Has *DI* itself already died the death of a thousand qualifications and objections by its own Catholic critical reception around the world? Or can it be retrieved as a form of public Catholic testimony to "the true lodestar" of Christ (*DI*, conclusion, p. 218), as I suggest in my part 1?

ROBERT A. CATHEY
McCormick Theological Seminary
Chicago, Illinois