

INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE AS THEOLOGICAL IMPERIALISM THE DCOSTA MOYAERT DEBATE

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INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

From a Christian theological point of view, one of the main challenges to interreligious dialogue is balancing personal commitment to your own religious faith system while simultaneously remaining “open” to “other” or “non-Christian” faith systems, and vice versa as well. It goes without saying that this central “challenge” leads to many interesting questions.

We can posit many of these core questions here at the outset of this essay. For example: Can an individual actually maintain a solid religious identity with clear distinctive parameters without shutting the door to what “other faiths” have to say on any particular religious concept, idea, doctrine, principle, and so forth? Indeed, is it even possible to be genuinely “open” to “other faiths” at all? If so, is it in fact possible to be genuinely “open” to “other faiths” AND still maintain full commitment to all of the essential components of your own religious faith system, or is modern religious man just fooling himself?

What’s more, several if not all of the key concepts contained in the “main challenge to interreligious dialogue” are also open to many questions (Clooney, 2010). For example: What does “open” to “other faiths” actually mean in practice versus in theory, and are there significant differences between the two? Why should the Christian faith be “open” in any kind of ways to the beliefs and/or practices of “other faiths”, and on what grounds (historical, biblical, etc.)? Shouldn’t “other faiths” be genuinely “open” to the core doctrines and beliefs of the Christian faith? Otherwise, (Cobb, 1982) what’s the point of the Christian “mission” as biblically defined? What did Christ in the Bible have to say about all of this?

Most importantly from a methodological point of view, how do we empirically verify “openness” to “other faiths” both from the Christian and

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non-Christian perspectives? How do we know when we have captured honest and authentic “openness” to other faiths OR authentic “openness” to the Christian faith, for that matter? Along these same lines, how do we distinguish interreligious dialogue that is genuinely “open” from one that is simply strategic engagement as a pretense or a means to achieve unrelated goals? Is genuinely truthful and honest “dialogue” between Christians and “other faiths” even possible from both points of view? What is interreligious “dialogue” and what are the criteria being employed to define when “dialogue” has actually taken place and when it has not?

As highly relevant as they are to understanding religious faith systems in modern times, these questions don’t address the implicit epistemological issues involved in interreligious dialogue. Should Christians even be directly engaged in such a practice called “interreligious dialogue” at all at any level, let alone global? Maybe yes, but maybe no, depending on the grounds upon which the argument is made and the sources employed to establish these grounds (Cobb, 1982). As well, it is practically impossible for any faith system to control or predict all of the long-term and short-term global consequences of direct participation within institutionalized dialogues with other faith systems, let alone the Christian faith system (Christ in a Pluralist Age, 1975).

Despite all these questions about the nature and possibility of interreligious dialogue, one thing is relatively certain. One of the central philosophical and epistemological issues implied in all of them is the tension that appears to exist between devotion to one’s own personal religious beliefs AND honest, authentic “openness” to “other faiths”. Assuming it is even possible to achieve a “balance” between them, almost certainly it would appear to be a tensive balance in essence (D’Costa, 1996).

If that is true, then learning how to manage that tensive balance may indeed be an important key to peace between the world’s different religious faith systems. These are some of the central themes and issues brought out by Moyaert as introductory remarks in the journal article cited above, which are then articulated and expanded much further into three major sections.

SECTION I: SOTERIOLOGY AND THEOLOGY OF RELIGIONS

In the first section, the author expounds upon the interconnection between faith conviction and “openness” to “other faiths” from a theological perspective. (Review of: “In Response to the Religious, 2015).” Here the main interest is to examine classical theology of religions and its traditional threefold typology of exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism (Hick, 1982). Moyaert focuses on how soteriology strongly influences the tension between faith commitment and openness to other faiths.

All the pertinent soteriological questions are posited and reviewed by the author from within the threefold typology of exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism. Are all religions equally valid in the eyes of God? Is the fact of religious plurality a curse or a blessing from God’s point of view? What is the

nature and function of other faiths given the salvific character of the Christian doctrine? And so forth.

Here Moyaert shows that the soteriological model of classical theology of religions functions in many ways. It can either hinder or promote particular kinds of relationships to “other faiths” (Knitter, 2005). As well, the theory contained within it significantly influences both the kind of interreligious dialogue that takes place and the tense relationship between faith identity and openness. What is the relationship between exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism AND interreligious dialogue, faith commitment, and openness to other faiths?

A: Exclusivism at the Expense of Openness

The exclusivism model is founded upon an irreparably pessimistic view of human nature. With original innate value as being made in the image of God, human beings nevertheless rejected God. This rejection caused them to be lost and perverted by sin (Moyaert, 2014). That is, human nature is inherently and constitutively sinful, a sinfulness that they cannot liberate themselves from in any anthropomorphic way. Human beings tore themselves from the bosom of a loving God, so to speak, and cannot be reconciled with that God except through genuine acceptance of Jesus Christ as personal Savior sent by God. God became flesh through his only begotten son, Jesus Christ, in order to save and redeem humanity. Exclusivist theology, therefore, contains within itself the epistemological requirements of salvation, divine incarnation, and redemption.

In exclusivist theology, the diversity of religious faiths tends to be viewed from the perspective of sinful human nature. Since all humanity is plagued by sinfulness, other religious faiths cannot really make any genuinely positive contributions to interreligious dialogue (Pratt, 2003). As well, for this reason there is no real appreciation for other religious faiths. Instead, other religions tend to be viewed simply as anthropomorphic attempts to achieve “salvation” on their own rather than ONLY through authentic personal faith in Christ.

All this having been said, it should not be very surprising to anyone that interreligious dialogue doesn’t usually rank very high in value for exclusivist theology. Dialogue with other faiths tends to be viewed as a mask to achieve selfish material interests and material institutional goals. That means that “dialogue” is not a quest for truth because “truth” has already been morally corrupted and relativized by sinful personal and material interests. So, then, there is not much if any genuine “openness” to other faiths.

When on occasion exclusivist theologians become somewhat optimistic and engage in interreligious dialogue, it is engagement characterized by a distinctive language and clear boundaries for what can and cannot be discussed. So long as what is on the table does not waver from the absolute truth of God through Christ, interreligious participation is allowable. But even then, the main motivation driving that participation is not acceptance of

dialogue in the context of religious diversity but, rather, proclamation of salvation only through personal acceptance of Christ on the cross.

In terms of faith commitment, identity, and dedication, exclusivist theology often claims superabundance, which makes it appear as if interreligious dialogue is viewed positively (Ricoeur, 1976). Moyaert takes issue with this claim, however, because it appears to contain a negative flip side. That is, the exclusivist model achieves “identity” by a priori excluding all others who come from a different religious faith. So, the soteriological model within exclusivist theology achieves faith commitment and identity by rejecting all other faiths a priori. Therefore, Moyaert is careful to underscore, “openness” is sacrificed at the altar of “identity”.

The individual who is the religious ‘other’ is not viewed as a legitimate or valid “believing subject” in their own right who can make significant positive contributions to interreligious dialogue because they don’t have the right faith. It is evident that the exclusivist worldview is dualistic in nature. There are only two types of human beings: Christians and non-Christians. Christians are right and non-Christians are wrong, so the latter need to be “converted” to the right way of believing. There is nothing contained in the faith system of “other faiths” that can make genuine and significant lasting contributions to interreligious dialogue.

Even the language employed within interreligious dialogue is viewed as illegitimate and inappropriate within the “antithetical structure of the exclusivist worldview”. We can use the vocabulary of “Christians vs. non-Christians” or believers vs. unbelievers within the exclusivist model. But we cannot talk in terms of “other faiths” or “believers of other faiths” or introduce into the analysis and discussion of religion at any level distinctions beyond the collective group known as “non-Christians”. Introducing such distinctions implies acceptance of equal validity and legitimacy between different religious faiths. In exclusivist theology, there is only ONE correct absolute faith - faith in Jesus Christ as savior of all humankind, not simply some part of it.

The dualistic character of exclusivism is often complimented by a “binary grammar” which views individuals within faiths other than Christian in a base negative manner as “others”. In other words, ourselves we are Christians, and ‘they’ are the ‘others’, a kind of binary division of humanity into self and others. However, the negative mirror image goes much further: we live the truth and they live a lie; we know God and they don’t; we are good and they are bad; we serve and they are selfish; we have grace and they lack grace; we are saved and they are not; we have faith and they don’t; and so forth.

The selfing and othering binary grammar of exclusivism has important consequences for identity, commitment, openness, and interreligious dialogue. In the first place, it establishes firm boundaries between identity and otherness. Uncertainties and ambiguities that may exist in the meaning and content of the faith system can be dealt with by a literal reading and interpretation of Biblical passages which can be spoken with certainty and

authority as absolute truth. Biblical interpretations which may vary from this literal view cannot be handled within exclusivist theology. Here identity is what remains the same, so it is opposed to the diversity and change of otherness. Absolute truth excludes dialogue, and identity excludes openness. So, then, claims Moyaert, the danger of exclusivism is that it tends to contain a myopic or narrow understanding of religious commitment and identity.

An even greater danger is that this fact can impact relations with other faiths at all levels of participation in extremely negative ways. It may indeed strengthen commitment among Christian believers themselves. But it is also clear that the soteriology of exclusivism in theory and in practice appears to strengthen the barriers between Christianity and other faiths, resulting in the application of a missiology exactly reversed from the Bible. At this point, exclusivism starts to operate like a self-fulfilling prophecy in the sense that excluding all “other faiths” compels Christians to only engage in relationships with their own Christian neighbors.

From this perspective, the doctrine of Kingdom of God is a very distant reality and hardly achievable in step-by-step human fashion. The soteriology of God rejection and human sinfulness contained in exclusivism does not appear to invite continuously healing relations with other faiths, according to Moyaert. Indeed, it seems to encourage “broken and discontinuous relations” with other faiths.

B: The Ambiguity of Inclusivism

Unlike exclusivist theology, here within the inclusivist theological approach the main soteriological emphasis is not a personal relationship with God the mediator of salvation but, rather, the mediation of “God’s will for universal salvation”. In other words, human beings can be saved without having any knowledge of Christ at all, although the absolute reality of salvation only in the divine incarnation remains. Moyaert claims that this makes inclusivism appear as if it is favorable towards interreligious dialogue because it posits that all humans are saved and all were created by God. All human beings share a common origin and the salvific character of humanity’s history is the same for everyone, making divine salvation the same for everyone. It’s simply that divine salvation is mediated differently for other faiths than it is for the Christian faith. That is, God makes salvation accessible to adherents of other faiths in different ways than for Christians.

So, then, different religious faith systems are not different in kind but, rather, differences in paths to salvation, the same salvation as for Christians. God is always universally present and shared with “other faiths”. This is the theological foundation for interreligious dialogue within inclusivism. From an inclusivist theological perspective, human beings are all interconnected in the PRESENT in a positive, optimistic way by sharing in the coming Reign of God on earth through participation in the mystery of salvation.

This present “connectedness” between human beings and God AND among human beings themselves forms the basis for a positive view of the religious “other” and, by extension, interreligious dialogue. Unlike exclusivist theology which starts with the Fall and places a pessimistic soteriological emphasis on excluding other faiths, discontinuity, and distinction, inclusivist theology points of contact, similarity, and continuity between faith systems. In this way, the religious universe becomes integrated into a “coherent whole”, making the religious “other” not so strange and depraved after all.

However, the great strength of this integrated aspect of the human religious universe in the inclusivist model is also exactly its weakness. How so? Moyaert says it continues the one-sided view of “openness” found within the exclusivist theological camp. The religious “other” within inclusivism does not appear as an independent other in its own right but, rather, in its connection to or affinity with the Christian faith. The strange religious “other” is absorbed within the known and familiar Christian tradition. It is Christian absorption of “other faiths” through appropriation, a unique selfing and othering grammar called encompassment rather than the strict selfing and othering technique employed by exclusivist theology.

The similarities between exclusivism and inclusivism do not end there, according to Moyaert. From within exclusivist theology, the “truth” claims contained in other faith systems are only true insofar as they confirm or lend support to Christian truth claims. This means that inclusivism contains within it a hierarchy of truth claims wherein the Christian faith sits at the top of that hierarchy. In other words, inclusivism is as hierarchical as exclusivism.

Therefore, the “tension” mentioned earlier between “identity” and “openness”, between commitment to one’s faith and openness to other faiths, is here expressed as tension between all-encompassing universalism and particularism. Inclusivism includes the religious “other”, Moyaert claims, but only by robbing that religious “other” separate and independent uniqueness. The tensive relationship between identity and openness is not “balanced” but, instead, “one-sided”.

C: Pluralism Democratizing the Religious Universe

According to Moyaert, the pluralism theological model is often presented as the “dream partner of interreligious dialogue”. Although distinctively lending itself well to the promise of dialogue between different religious faiths, it also gives rise to several problems. The fundamental feature of pluralist theology is the belief that different religious faith systems simply represent different ways of conceiving and relating to a “divine Reality” that transcends all human attempts to express or describe it.

All the various religious faiths including Christianity are severely limited by their own human imperfections in their attempts to comprehend a “divine Reality” that transcends human-based understanding, an incapacity based in the Kantian distinction between the “noumenal” and the “phenomenal”, between the divine Transcendent itself and the way limited

HUMAN BEINGS express it in material reality in the context of culture and other different human circumstances.

The upshot of this distinction is that each culture produces its own response to the divine Transcendent. In turn, this means that all of the diverse religious faiths participate in a similar soteriological project, but not one that relates to classical theology of religions. Pluralist theologians such as Hick (1982), Knitter (1985), and several others argue that the soteriology of pluralism is the liberation from egoism it provides in order to permit a focus on “ultimate reality”. Therefore, according to pluralist theology, no particular religious faith can claim soteriological superiority. Within pluralism, soteriological parity is the name of the game.

The soteriological model of pluralist theology strongly implies a certain view of interreligious dialogue. It claims that this dialogue cannot be authentic nor fruitful unless four conditions are met. First, it must be accepted that all religions have a common ground. There are not only commonalities and similarities between different religious faiths but, more profound epistemological connections, namely, one single overarching “divine Reality” or “divine Transcendent” but just expressed differently in various religious faiths. The presupposition here is clear: unity of religious faith is achieved through diversity.

The second precondition for authentic interreligious dialogue is the “de-absolutization of truth”. Since human beings cannot perfectly express or describe this “divine Reality”, this means that no particular religious faith system possesses a monopoly on “truth”. Truth remains a mystery in this theological model. This claim has significant impact upon the nature and function of interreligious dialogue because it demands from participants wholehearted genuine acceptance of the relativity of their own religious faith systems AS A PRECONDITION for participation.

The third pre-requisite for interreligious dialogue within the pluralism model is the view that the faith system of the religious “other” constitutes a “supplementation of one’s own faith tradition”. This supplementary view of other faiths implies that the goals of getting a better view of “divine Reality” can only be realized by relativizing one’s own religious faith system AND constitutively adding to it or mixing with it the faith system of the “other”.

The assumption is that Christians can only get a better view of “divine reality” by transcending their own religious faith system through relativizing it. A better understanding of “truth” can only be gained listening and learning “from the truth of others”. In this way, human beings are changed or transform themselves to a higher level of understanding “divine Reality” through encountering or dialoguing people from other faith systems. This is called the dialogical concept of truth.

This conception of “truth” leads to a different way to perceive and understand the relationship between faith identity and openness to other faiths.

The tense relationship between them contained in the previous soteriological models, due largely to the view that they are opposed to each other, effectively disappears since they are now interconnected. Therefore, interreligious dialogue becomes a place where faith adherents go to get “truths” from adherents of other faith systems in order to “fill in the gaps” in their own faith. This ‘fill-in-the-gaps’ view of participation in interreligious dialogue is precisely what gives the impression that pluralism is its “dream partner”. Moyaert takes issue with this point of view.

That is, pluralist theology is not the dream partner of interreligious dialogue. Rather than acknowledging other religious faiths as independent legitimate claims to religious truth in their own right, it transforms all religious diversity by collapsing or absorbing it into one truth for all faiths. The religious mask of this model appears to be an emphasis on distinct religious difference, diversity, and plurality. In fact, the soteriological emphasis is on universality and commonality. The assumption of common ground in practice involves the imposition of limits on listening or what can be heard from the religious “other” (Cobb, 1982, 1975). In this way, pluralism shows undeniable similarities to inclusivism (Knitter, 2005, 1985).

Like inclusivism, pluralism perceives religious solidarity by emphasizing continuity between religions, which means that conflicts and contradictions (discontinuities) between different religious faith systems are not focused upon very heavily. As well, like inclusivism pluralism adopts the grammar of encompassment or integration of different religious faith systems. (A Critical Survey of Christian Attitudes Towards, 1985). However, this is accomplished by relativizing them through absorption into a universal “way to the Ultimate”.

SECTION II: THE MOVEMENT AWAY FROM SOTERIOLOGY

In the second section of the article, the author reviews recent theological literature to illustrate the emergence of increasing scholarly dissatisfaction with the classical theological view of interreligious dialogue. Several major criticisms are identified and examined thoroughly. One of the absolutely major criticisms of soteriology in classical theology of religions is that it perverts the virtue of openness, Moyaert claims. Another major criticism is that the threefold soteriological models are abstract designs with little if any practical relevance or utility.

A third criticism the author identified in the recent literature on theology of religions is that the soteriological models that are employed steadfastly avoid reference to religious traditions other than Christianity. Many of these dissatisfied theologians find this avoidance insulting and patronizing. In other words, “other faiths” are not being heard in the process of “interreligious dialogue” within classical theology of religion. These and other major criticisms are expressed more broadly within the relatively new soteriological model of particularism, which attempts to move beyond the obsession with soteriology within classical theology of religions

That is why Moyaert spends a great deal of time explicating some of its main tenets, focusing mainly on the way particularism comes to a different understanding about the tense relationship between faith identity and openness to other faiths. Within this newer perspective, the claim is that hermeneutical openness should precede soteriological appreciation. You cannot truly be open to the truths of other faith systems until you are open hermeneutically.

That is to say, following Knitter, you cannot be “open” to other faiths unless you accept those other faiths as truly and independently different in their own right, not only insofar as they are connected to the Christian faith. Other faiths have to be accepted as truly different and those differences in themselves must also be truly accepted. That is why Knitter calls this new particularism model the “Acceptance Model” of theology. Essentially, Moyaert views this new perspective as the “fourth paradigm” in interreligious theology.

Acceptance, however, is only the first preconditional feature of the particularism model, argues Knitter and followers. Since the formerly “distinctive” quality of Christianity has been swept away by the “winds of modernity”, the distinctiveness of “other faiths” must now be recognized and accepted as the inevitable result of some kind of historical-evolutionary process. According to pluralist theologians like Knitter and Pratt (2003), this fact strongly implies that the assumption of common ground or linkages between different religions is essentially untenable.

The claim here is that there are irreconcilable or irremediable differences between different religious faiths. So, then, as such they cannot be linked or combined conceptually in any way. “There can be no meaningful conceptual contact among the religions”. Therefore, the very essence of the concept “particularism” implies that the differences between religious faiths cannot be reduced to a “common ground” as assumed in the other soteriological models. In essence, religious differences are irreducible. Due to the “newness of this model and its radical differences from previous models, Moyaert asserts the need to describe its central tenets.

A: Faith Commitment

The particularism model is suspicious about theologies of religion based in “common ground” perspectives and abstract schemas. In this view, religious meanings are always founded upon concrete practices within specific cultural contexts. So, the heavy focus is on the practical features of religion rather than the cognitive aspects. Religion is an all-encompassing interpretative framework that tells people who they are (identity) and HOW to live their lives; in effect, it is a way of life.

However, in this “way of life” view of religion, language takes front priority over material experience. Language appropriates for itself a way of life and a religious vocabulary, and as such creates a vivid religious life for the adherent. Since everyone in a culture shares a certain way of life, particularism

emphasizes the communal dimension of faith identity. Becoming a member of a cultural community is what counts in this sort of religious identity.

Therefore, adherents from different religious traditions practice different ways of life that touches every part of practical and cognitive life - from marriage or mode of dress or reading texts TO all rituals, traditions, customs TO all choices, decisions, perceptions, and interpretations. No component of the adherent's "way of life" will be left untouched. It is not "personal", as in previous soteriological models, because it is comprehensive and takes account of every aspect of life.

Although particularism acknowledges and respects diversity and plurality of religions, genuine "openness" to other religions is considered important. But this "openness" doesn't mean that adherents of particularism don't "stand somewhere". Indeed, particularism views faith commitments as "exclusive". They cannot be combined and they are not interchangeable, and this feature of particularism theology has serious implications for both interreligious dialogue and interreligious conflict.

B: Doubting the Sincerity of Soteriological Openness

The particularism view also has serious implications for the soteriological vision of religious pluralism. Within this model, soteriological openness is not only approached with caution or suspicion but, rather, viewed as insincere or dishonest. In other words, it perverts the virtue of "openness" required for genuinely meaningful interreligious dialogue. So, then, it turns out that the so-called soteriological "openness" of previous theological models in the theology of religions is actually a type of soteriological "closedness". How does something presented as "openness" in practice actually turn out to be a just another form of "closedness"?

Particularism argues that the soteriological approach presupposes that different religious faiths represent different paths or roads to universal salvation. But the term "salvation" here is complex and extremely problematic because it doesn't open up space for acknowledging "other" faiths in their "otherness". Rather, the "goal" of "salvation" is treated as the "path" or "road" to "salvation". In this way, the other faith is NOT taken seriously in its "otherness".

The "goal" of "salvation" in the Christian faith is projected into the other "path" or "road" or "religion". In doing so, the Christian religion equalizes and then absorbs "other faiths" into itself. The "other" religious faith is not really "understood" in its own right or in its own independent "particularity" but, rather, "understood" from within the "structure of prejudices" of Christian soteriology.

The terminal effect of this soteriological feature of Christian theology upon genuine interreligious conversation is obvious. It is effectively "short-circuited" even BEFORE it can begin in earnest because it does not recognize or acknowledge the "other" AS "other". Therefore, there cannot be

any “mutual understanding”; the meaning of what is being said by the “other faiths” cannot be grasped from their independent point by the Christian adherent. This means that soteriological openness is NOT hermeneutical openness.

So, then, what are the preconditions or pre-requisites for attainment of “true” hermeneutical openness within the model of particularism? According to Moyaert, this is the real hermeneutical challenge for interreligious dialogue. This dialogue can only begin to take place with a genuine desire to “understand” adherents of the “other faiths” in their otherness, that is, from their point of view. That is what authentic hermeneutical openness means, according to Moyaert, as opposed to the soteriological openness of the Christian tradition projected into the “other faiths”. The intractable, incompatible otherness of other religious traditions needs to be acknowledged and accepted by Christian adherents. From the particularism point of view, the so-called “soteriological openness” contained within the Christian tradition is nothing but smoke and mirrors, so to speak.

SECTION III

Let’s attempt a general recap of the author’s main themes up to this point. In Section I, the author talks about the quest for soteriological openness in classical theology of religions and the problems associated with this “quest”. In Section II, the author then argues in the particularism model for a movement away from soteriological openness towards a more genuine hermeneutical openness which recognizes and accepts the religious “other” as an independent “other” in their own right, NOT as a soteriological extension of Christian soteriology.

In this third and final section of the article prior to the Conclusion, Moyaert claims that hermeneutical openness leads inexorably to the transformation of theology itself. The model of particularism with hermeneutical openness expresses itself in comparative theology. The central feature of this comparative theology is a central theological focus on the comparative study of religion. This comparative study of religion contains several key features.

First, it de-emphasizes the value of a priori theological assumptions on interpretational schemes since they tend to ignore the self-understanding of “other faiths”. Second, it rejects the a priori theological claim that there is only one global perspective on religion. Third, comparative theology explores the Christian tradition from the perspective of other faith traditions. From this perspective, it can be viewed as a genuine interreligious theology because it critically engages all religious sources and seeks to understand them as valid independent sources in their own right, in their wholeness and particularity a la Francis Clooney. That “understanding” does not emerge from the comparative theologian’s biases and expectations but, rather, in establishing distance from them.

Comparative theology also implies a detailed study of other religious traditions, usually one at a time. This detailed consideration of one religious faith primarily involves a close examination of particular religious texts that differ from the texts of one's own religion. According to Moyaert, the reader of such a text must adopt a cognitive posture of "submission" and "self-effacement" in order to reach the levels of patience, perseverance, and imagination required for "understanding" it. This is why comparative theology differs from comparative religion, because it stems from the comparative theologian's "commitment to God".

This commitment is firmly maintained as they pursue their research, analysis and writing of the texts of the religious "other". Comparative theologians adopt this cognitive posture because the aim is to know "a loving God more completely and intelligently". For this reason, however, Moyaert asserts that such a venture of theological reflection remains a theological project, the next phase of theological development.

A: Comparative Theology as an Ambiguous Discipline?

The Catholic scholar and theologian Gavin D'Costa (2015, 1996) is deeply suspicious about any theological claims that balance between faith identity or commitment and genuine hermeneutical openness can be realized by comparative theology. Moyaert characterizes D'Costa's first criticism of comparative theology is that it is too ambiguous because they don't explicate their own fiduciary interests, that is, they don't make a clear and strong theological case to what they are doing, they don't make a clear theological argument for the central significance of hermeneutical openness to theology. The question becomes: what exactly are the full theological presuppositions of comparative theology? From a theological point of view, why should we enter into a "comparison" with "other faiths"?

D'Costa's second critique of comparative theology is that it hesitates to make any judgements or views judgement with great suspicion or misgivings. This particular critique addresses the issue of what happens AFTER comparison to "other faiths" is made. In the debate with Clooney, the latter argues that comparison should occur BEFORE judgment of the "other faith". For Clooney, theological judgments demand adopting a "humble" posture towards other faiths, namely, a long and patient direct engagement with the central texts of the "other". For his part, D'Costa believes that more is at stake theologically than simple humility or prudence, as Clooney claims. He argues that reluctance to engage in theological judgements of "other faiths" constitutes a feeble psychological reaction to unfounded accusations of "imperialism".

In other words, theological judgments of "other faiths" are defined by many theologians as actions of imperialism. These theologians believe that judging "other faiths" by alien criteria is a form of theological imperialism that matches politico-economic imperialism. Consequently, comparative

theologians like Clooney adopt a protective psychological mode against them in the formulation and development of their theology.

B: Hermeneutical Circle as Ricoeur's Hermeneutical Arc

Here Moyaert argues that D'Costa's telling criticisms of comparative theology can be at least partially addressed by viewing it as a "hermeneutical circle" using Ricoeur's concept of "hermeneutical arc" (1976). That is to say, comparative theologians can face D'Costa's challenge if they begin to view comparative theology as a continuous process of moving back and forth between faith commitment or identity and openness to other. This is possible, Moyaert claims, if comparative theologians use Ricoeur's theory of interpretation especially as it is applied with the reading of the texts of theological "others".

Ricoeur's theory of interpreting these texts breaks down into three phases: the naïve first reading, the critical-analytical second reading, and the final phase of appropriation. These three phases are known as the "hermeneutical arc", and they are motored by the tension existing between understanding and explaining. The assumption here is that better understanding occurs through greater explaining. This is achieved in comparative theology by alternating constantly between commitment to one's faith and preventing its prejudices and presuppositions from entering into the interpretative process during the reading of texts of the "other faiths".

All three "phases" of the "hermeneutical arc" are aimed at understanding the "meaning" of these texts from the point of view of the "other faiths", NOT from the particular theological point of view of the reader. The first naïve reading of that text is obviously a preliminary, pre-critical one. When reading a text, the first time, mainly immediate familiar meaning comes to the mind of the reader. The full effect of the reader's culture and context and theology are manifested here. Unless there are additional phases of interpretation that follow, the reader's own theological tradition shapes the horizon or boundaries for understanding the other religious tradition. On the other hand, when viewed reflexively by the reader cultural and theological prejudices and presuppositions can be recognized if the reader discloses their fiduciary interests, as D'Costa claims that they should. In this way, the naïve reader can check, validate, and correct their reading of the "other" text, thus preventing projection of their own biases into that text before moving to the next hermeneutical phases.

In order to genuinely understand the "inner dynamics" of the text itself, the second phase of critical-analytical is necessary which aims to SCIENTIFICALLY EXPLAIN the text by placing it at a "distance" from one's own interpretative scheme. Here the text must be treated by the reader as a study object where several methods can be used to decode meaning. In doing so, the reader moves towards an understanding of a deeper meaning of text. Ricoeur calls this deeper reading "critical analysis" while Clooney (2010a, 2010b) calls it "close reading". Needless to say, they function in the same way

to prevent projection of the “reader’s” meaning into the text, and in this way achieve some measure of distance or objectivity.

Finally, the last stage of the Ricoeur hermeneutical process is called appropriation. The central issue here is that the reader actualizes or “appropriates” the meaning of the text from the point of view of the “other faith”. The reader starts to understand how the meaning of the text reflects the lived experience of adherents of the “other faith”. In reaching this level of “understanding” of the religious texts of the “other faith”, Ricoeur claims, the reader has no choice but to “understand himself better” and “differently” from the “other faith” adherent.

The reader’s self becomes “enlarged”, not just achieving an improved understanding of the text itself. In other words, when the true meaning of the text is actualized by the reader that text effectively “transforms the reader”, says Ricoeur. In a manner of speaking, then, Ricoeur claims that a reader finds themselves as a reader by losing themselves to the text itself, by debasing themselves in front of that text. The argument here is that the only way a theological reader can arrive at an authentic reading and understanding of the texts of other faiths is by not a priori reducing God to the fixed and familiar claims of one’s own theological interests because that would mean placing limits on God’s activity.

This argument holds profound implications for theology and interreligious dialogue, Moyaert argues. It turns out that D’Costa’s strong emphasis on the central importance of theological judgment in comparative theology is correct. Interreligious dialogue cannot end at the point of simply understanding the “other faith”. It must also ask what the newly appropriated “meanings” contained in those texts of the “other faith” say about God.

D’Costa asks: What does that mean? Moyaert answers that from a theological perspective, it certainly doesn’t mean that the purpose of engaging “other faiths” is to discover how they complement each other OR how to remove the possibility of religious conflict OR how to achieve a consensus of meaning OR how to compare differences between religions. Supposedly, it is about asking “where God comes into view”, Moyaert claims, and doing so with a genuine attitude of hermeneutical openness.

This can only be done by bringing back into the last phase of Ricoeur’s hermeneutical arc or circle what was suspended in the first phase, namely, “normative theological judgments”, as D’Costa insisted. This means that understanding the “other faith” is a never-ending process where the impact of the meaning contained in the texts of the “other faith” on Christian thinking and life experience is transformational. The “moment of theological judgment” in comparative theology cannot be intentionally avoided out of some unfounded fear of being accused of harboring “imperialist” theological motives, as it were. Why is this the case, Moyaert asks?

Theological judgments ensure that both one’s own faith convictions and the challenge of “other faiths” are taken very seriously. It ensures that

God's transcendence is not determined a priori. Lastly, but very pivotally, and following D'Costa's argument, it also means admitting that not everything which seems possible in interreligious dialogue is truly possible. And that may be very difficult for many Christians to swallow, theologically speaking.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

This essay began by asking to what extent, if at all, the problem of the tense relationship between faith identity AND openness to other faiths can be realized. Moyaert's argument is that the soteriological models within the theology of religion assume that this problem can indeed be solved and should be solved a priori. The model of comparative theology, on the other hand, questions this a priori assumption that hermeneutical openness should be one precondition for soteriological openness. This newer theological model emphasizes the continuous, never-ending, and therefore, perpetually "unfinished" nature of that tense relationship.

That means that the condition sine qua non of authentic interreligious dialogue is hermeneutical openness, not soteriological openness. For this reason, fixed stable answers to fixed stable questions is unattainable in comparative theology. Here searching endlessly for how the "grand narrative" expresses itself in the "other faith" is replaced by genuine learning from the "other faith" in its own terms that leaves one's faith identity vulnerable to transformation, effectively deranging one's personal life experiences and beliefs.

Interreligious dialogue in the comparative view is not about solving the problem of diversity of religious faiths because it is not viewed as a "problem" in the first place. So, then, comparative theology does not solve the tense relationship between conviction to one's faith and genuine openness to other faiths. Rather, it stands firmly exactly in the middle of this tension. Why? Answer: it is believed that by doing so one can learn more about God than utilizing any other theological approach.

D'Costa and several other modern theologians might beg to differ. Regardless, Moyaert's argument is well worth consideration and thorough discussion as long as its weaknesses and strengths are clearly understood from both a theoretical and methodological view AND the validity of opposing theological perspectives are introduced into that argument in a straightforwardly honest manner.

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