

# "*Dominus Iesus*" - Or: A Plea for Bold Humility<sup>1</sup>

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## Absolute Truth

In the mid of 1980s I attended a series of seminars with the Sufi mystic-scholar Hassan Askari at Selly Oak Colleges, Birmingham, UK. A group of evangelicals had also signed up for the course without realising that it was a Muslim who was directing the study. And so, 15 minutes before each session the threatened Christians huddled into a circle and prayed to the Holy Spirit that they not be influenced by the course. I thought of this odd experience when reading the doctrinal declaration *Dominus Iesus*. Apparently we are allowed to dialogue with members of other faith traditions, although we have nothing to learn in matters of doctrine. We might not know the questions but we already have the answer. The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF) is inviting us to enter into dialogue while being sure of the end result before we begin. Whatever has happened to the bold humility of John XXIII and Paul VI? Whatever has happened to the pilgrim Church, *semper reformanda*, seeking out greater understanding? If God is present in other faith traditions, have we not the duty to seek out that Presence, to listen and learn and change and transform ourselves and our discourse as a result of that divine encounter? What is the purpose of inter-faith dialogue if we already possess absolute truth? Is it really so heretical to re-work our doctrinal discourse within a newly emerging inter-faith context? Is it so heterodox to consult Muslims and Jews, Hindus and Buddhists on matters of doctrine?

Struggling together for the deepest human values we are learning to replace hierarchical frames with egalitarian ones, to put aside feelings of superiority and become companions on the way, to breakout of a mono-cultural straight-jacket and become multi-cultural, to abandon mono-centric models of international communities and feel our way towards a poly-centric communion of communities. Dialogue is teaching us to give up dominating patriarchal modes and free ourselves for liberation, to witness not through invading the other's space but through seeking together. Experience teaches that in the dialogue of life and action we are no longer providers but advocates, not instructors but facilitators, not centres of power but vulnerable persons. In the words of the Gospel: not owners but stewards. However, *Dominus Iesus* is devoid of the wonder and unpredictability of a living faith. Mystery is absent. The declaration has tried to lock God up in a firmly bolted tabernacle of propositions. The God of *Dominus Iesus* is safe and domesticated, almost fully under control.

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<sup>1</sup> Downloaded from [http://sedosmission.org/old/eng/Prior\\_2.htm](http://sedosmission.org/old/eng/Prior_2.htm) on 16 July 2016.

The outline of *Dominus Iesus* is straightforward enough: the fullness of truth has been revealed in Jesus Christ alone who has given himself to the Church and the Church of Christ subsists in the Roman Catholic Church. *Dominus Iesus* outlines, "certain indispensable elements" (par.3) of "certain truths of the faith" (par.23) binding on all Roman Catholics. There are at least eight paragraphs where we read, "it must be firmly believed that..." In numerous other paragraphs we meet phrases such as, "faith requires us to profess..." or, "the obedience of faith implies acceptance of the truth that...". *Dominus Iesus* is surely the ideological complement to the beatification of Pius IX and Pius XII. Rome is reasserting a single language, a single Graeco-Latin discourse defined and defended by a monarchical papacy. *Dominus Iesus* declares the Judaeo-Christian revelation to be the one and only revelation of God (#7). Thus, Jews and Christians have faith while adherents to other religions have mere belief, "that sum of experience and thought that constitutes the human treasury of wisdom and religious aspiration..."(par.7). In line with this, only the Judaeo-Christian Scriptures are inspired texts; other religious texts can be helpful and spiritually rich but are not inspired. While God is present outside the Church, it is apparently a divine presence without a divine revelation.

Though peppered with welcome nuances – made necessary by the openness of the documents of the Johannine Council (1962-65) - the CDF has nevertheless returned to the heno-cultural frame of the Pius Era: Rome carries the tradition, it is left to the rest of us to translate and explain. Rome is the sole harbinger of absolute truth – all else is at best appendage, at worst error. Vatican II has been absorbed by Vatican I. Catholic truth about God is, "unique, full and complete because he who speaks and acts is the Incarnate Son of God." (par.6). We are back to a-historical, perennial propositions apparently above and beyond any specific cultural context. Whatever truth others hold we already possess. This is the ecclesiology I learnt in primary school from un-reconstituted nuns in the 1950s. And so, perhaps we should read *Dominus Iesus* as the reaction of a threatened power-centre in a globalising world. In the world of trans-national conglomerates, of the World Bank and IMF, of consumerist and neo-capitalist driven globalisation, in a mono-polar world of political power, we face the stark choice of either retreating into a sectarian ghetto or growing into an ecumenical and prophetic diaspora. *Dominus Iesus* provides an ideology for the ghetto. Meanwhile, life and death witness by millions of believers at the coal face is opening up a future for mission.

I am concerned that *Dominus Iesus* closes a discourse only just beginning. I am even more concerned that the declaration is in danger of being used as an ideological grid by right-wing, extremist elements in conflict situations. The strains of "Onward Christian Soldiers" sound innocent enough in the quiet English countryside. However, when the hymn is belted out by an Apprentice Boys' March as a prelude to a riot in Northern Ireland, or by Indonesian Christians before their ethnic cleansing and religious crusade in Ambon (as earlier this year), then the language of "absolute truth" becomes not just offensive, but dangerous. What sounds innocent enough in Rome, becomes arrogantly offensive where Christians are minorities and becomes down right dangerous in places of communal violence. At best the language of *Dominus Iesus* justifies the maintenance of small, isolated, ineffectual, Christian ghettos scattered across Asia; at worst it reinforces arrogance, aggression and communal conflict.

## Multi-culturalism

*Dominus Iesus* points out threats and dangers to the Graeco-Latin tradition, which has dominated discourse in the Christian Churches for almost 2000 years. This is a valid and necessary contribution to an ongoing dialogue as we slowly stumble from being a mono-cultural Church and grow into a multi-cultural Communion of Churches. Thus, if *Dominus Iesus* were presented as a discussion document, it would be a welcome and timely contribution. There are important, indeed fundamental, issues at stake in sharing our living faith authentically and transparently across cultural frontiers and religious boundaries.

The declaration lists a whole basket-full of errors under the general heading of "relativistic theories" (par.4). Personally, I have yet to meet a single one of these errors in the Asian theologians that I encounter. It seems that "relativism" is the new word for modernism. Attempts to come to terms with the modern world early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century were stigmatised as modernism. The heresy of modernism justified Pius X's reign of terror which in turn delayed Catholic theological reform for half a century. Today, it seems, tentative sketches of a living theology of inter-faith experience that do not ruthlessly reiterate the restrictive discourse of Rome, are now stigmatised as relativism.

Multi-cultural and multi-faith paradigms certainly question the mono-cultural and exclusive language of traditional Graeco-Latin formulations. The question is: how can we express our genuine faith transparently within and across different linguistic and cultural settings without deciding beforehand that our western discourse is the only norm? It is the ancient question of "universal and particular" writ anew as cultures and religions rub against each other in a globalising world. To insist upon a single language is arrogant. To speak – and believe – bi-culturally is imperative.

Asia is challenging the rest of the world with its liberative inter-faith theological praxis, lived out and articulated in Asian categories. I can quite understand that this ecclesial praxis is threatening to western hegemony, perhaps more so than the Marxian methodology of Latin American liberation theologies. Asian theologies are alternatives not just to any current Western theology. They are slowly providing – or at least inching towards - an alternative appropriation of the entire Christian discourse which for almost two millennia has been formulated in Graeco-Latin language.

Since the Johannine Council of forty years ago, Churches in Africa and Asia have not been simply translating read-made formulations into their own languages. They have been engaged in a multi-dimensional encounter with other cultures and religions. Important elements within Asian Christian Communities have been re-rooting themselves into their local contexts while remaining open to wider regional and global context. For this process to succeed Churches need time, patience and the freedom to make mistakes. It took centuries for the West to work out key christological issues. It may well take decades and perhaps many heresies for the African and Asian Churches to discover who Christ is in their context.

Sadly, I find not the slightest indication in *Dominus Iesus* that inculturation is any more than a literal translation of the CDF's version of the Graeco-Latin tradition. This is cultural arrogance. The challenge is to experience and express the Truth in more than one language, more than one culture, to allow Truth to shine forth without insisting upon a narrow cultural hegemony.

### **The Wrong Starting Point**

"If you set out on the wrong road, no amount of dogged persistence will get you to your destination." (Chinese proverb). Once again, the CDF is rigidly distinguishing between "proclamation" and "dialogue". "...the Church's proclamation of Jesus Christ... today also makes use of the practice of inter-religious dialogue. Such dialogue certainly does not replace, but rather accompanies the *missio ad gentes*..." (par.2). Dialogue seems to be a subsidiary activity. Seeing that only we have the whole truth, the one revelation and the single volume of inspired Scriptures and that our doctrine must not be influenced let alone developed through the experience of dialogue, what remains of dialogue is pure tactic. Apparently, we dialogue in order that others come to understand – and if possible – accept the Truth as we know it.

An alternative starting point would be a theology of dialogue. Such a theology begins with the mystery of the Trinity: God-in-Dialogue, God-in-Community. A theology of dialogue grows naturally from a theology of the Word: "In the beginning was the Word... in him was life, and the life was the light of all people." (Jn 1:1, 4. Cf. Heb 1:1-4; 1 Jn 1:1-4). For the CDF dialogue is just one mission activity; for the Asian Churches dialogue is the mode, the way we mission. Dialogue is an essential characteristic of our living and proclaiming. In Asia dialogue is not one activity among many, it is an essential dimension and core characteristic of the whole of our life and doctrine. We proclaim-in-dialogue. Both theologically and practically dialogue is the way we are Church. Doctrinally because of theologies of the Trinity and the Word; practically because horizontal conversion between religious traditions is outlawed by most Asian countries.

### **Urgent need for a New General Council of the Latin Church**

In bold humility the Asian Churches are continuing the practical and doctrinal task of living out and articulating who Jesus Christ is to the peoples of Asia in the context of other living faiths in the face of avaricious neo-capitalist globalisation and authoritarian, often brutal, regimes. In life and death situations what is needed is encouragement in the struggle against oppression and brutality. The implications of God's saving presence and revelation in other faith traditions needs ongoing dialogue among bishops, theologians and the wider Community.

*Dominus Iesus* shows that the CDF is not listening to what the Spirit is saying to the Churches (cf Rev 2:11). Diocesan bishops are the successors to the apostles not Roman bureaucrats. The constitutional way for the world's bishops to regain their episcopal authority is by means of a General Council of the Latin Church. The calling of a new Council is becoming ever more urgent. First, the new Assembly might consider finishing the work of the Johannine Council by carrying out a root and branch reform of the Roman Curia by radically decentralising the Communion of Catholic Latin Rite Churches according to the ancient principles of collegiality,

subsidiarity and solidarity. Thus having ensured that the central bureaucracy will not betray the Council at a later date, the successors of the apostles could take up crucial questions that have emerged from their day-to-day care of the Churches, in the face of systemic violence and the brutalisation of cultural values. This is the crucial context for working out theological guidelines to inter-faith relations. The broad scheme of *Ad gentes* is already there waiting to be filled out with the experience of the past 40 years. "Missionary activity is nothing else, and nothing less, than the manifestation of God's plan, its epiphany and realisation in the world and in history; that by which God, through mission, clearly brings to its conclusion the history of salvation." (*Ad gentes*, 9). The Council need not concern itself with the practice of dialogue; genuine practical guidelines are the responsibility of those in the field, that is, of the individual Episcopal Conferences. As we enter the third millennium, so we need to return to the decentralised Church of the First Centuries.

**Notes:**

(John Prior is a Divine Word Missionary who has been working in Indonesia since 1973).

P.S. *Dominus Iesus* was approved by the Pope on 16<sup>th</sup> June and was signed by Ratzinger on 6<sup>th</sup> August and now released on 5<sup>th</sup> September – the very week that Jacques Dupuis SJ is facing the CDF in the first of the hearings on his book. Coincidence? ).

Ref.: Text from the Author.