

THEOLOGIES AND THEOLOGIANS OF RELIGIOUS PLURALISM

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Abstract

Theologies to apprehend the phenomenon of religious pluralism continue to be evolving, with Asian theologians playing significant roles. Within the Catholic Church this was viewed as problematic in the 1990s, culminating with the Vatican promulgating the declaration *Dominus Iesus*. It alleges that relativistic theories have been advanced in the context of the praxis of interreligious dialogue. To counter them, *Dominus Iesus* reaffirms the doctrines of the uniqueness and universality of Jesus Christ and the Church. The present article looks at this, offering a view of the theologies of those accused of promoting relativism, as well as those who were sanctioned by the Roman Curia, most of whom were from Asia or associated with the continent. The article is premised on the thesis that Asian theologians are best positioned to be at the forefront of evolving the theologies of religious pluralism and the investigations into their works can be seen as validation of the thesis.

Keywords: Anthony de Mello, *Dominus Iesus*, Jacques Dupuis, John Hick, Joseph Ratzinger, Paul Knitter, Raimon Panikkar, Tissa Balasuriya

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Introduction

While the fact of religious pluralism has been an Asian experience for centuries and millennia, theological reflections on the same is but a recent endeavour. Because Western hegemony has wielded significant influence on most areas of life since European colonialism, Christian theology in Asia has also been largely shaped by Western concerns. So it was only when the West began to experience the reality of religious diversity on a distinctive scale in the mid-twentieth century that theologies of religious pluralism slowly emerged. Not only are these theologies new and novel they also quickly became controversial.

Within the Catholic Church this was brought to the fore about two decades ago with the Vatican declaration *Dominus Iesus*. The reaction to it, from both within and without the church, attests to the sensitivity religious pluralism evokes. This article begins by examining why *Dominus Iesus* was so controversial, the context within which it was proclaimed, and what it teaches about the church's attitudes towards those who are outside of it. It then goes on to explore the theologies and theologians associated with the reflections on the fact of religious pluralism, especially the critical role played by Asian theologians.

1. *Dominus Iesus* and the Problem of Relativism

The Vatican declaration *Dominus Iesus*¹ was officially released on 5 September 2000 at a press conference by then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger who was at that time the Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF). That a press conference was the platform to announce a church document speaks to its import not only for the church but for those outside of it as well. Ratzinger began by locating the significance of *Dominus Iesus*, subtitled "On the Unicity and Salvific Universality of Jesus Christ and the Church," with reference to the "contemporary debate on the relationship of Christianity to other religions."² He highlights the problem, namely the mistaken notion that "all religions are equally valid ways of salvation for those who follow them," and declares that this has

¹ Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, "*Dominus Iesus*," http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20000806_dominus-iesus_en.html

² Joseph Ratzinger, "Reasons for the Christian Claim," *Remarks made by the Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith at the Presentation of the Church document Dominus Iesus* (Press Room of the Holy See, September 5, 2000), <https://english.clonline.org/news/current-events/2000/05/09/reasons-for-the-christian-claim>.

become widespread as a result of the pervasive influence of “the cultural tendencies prevalent in the West today, which can be defined, without fear of contradiction, using the word *relativism*.”³ He specifically spells out the mistaken presuppositions that these theologies of religious pluralism harbour:

the conviction of the ungraspability and inexpressibility of divine truth; relativistic attitudes toward truth itself, according to which what is true for some would not be true for others; the radical opposition posited between the logical mentality of the West and the symbolic mentality of the East; the overdone subjectivism of those who regard reason as the only source of knowledge; the metaphysical emptying out of the mystery of the incarnation; the eclecticism of those who, in theological research, absorb categories from other philosophical and religious systems, without considering either their internal coherence or their compatibility with the Christian faith; finally, the tendency to interpret Scripture without the Tradition and Magisterium of the Church.⁴

While Ratzinger is probably quite on target with the presuppositions that has brought about the theologies of religious pluralism, that they are problematic is certainly debatable. However, as Prefect of the CDF and acting in his capacity as custodian of the Catholic faith, it is understandable that his preoccupation is with safeguarding Catholic doctrines. In fact, the declaration was widely viewed as an attempt to check the rise of unconventional theologies, especially those that seem to be an affront to the traditional teachings of the church. One of the initial responses to *Dominus Iesus* came from Bishop Francesco Lambiasi, then-President of the Italian Bishops’ Commission for the Doctrine of the Faith, who was reported by the Italian newspaper *Avvenire* as saying,

The declaration comes like a ring on a finger, because while the Pope and the whole church are celebrating a Holy Year on the fundamental truth of Christianity, some theologians here and there, in different corners of the world, tend to forget it. Therefore, it is right to be clear and to avoid that the faithful be disoriented given certain positions.⁵

Then-Archbishop Theodore McCarrick of Newark, USA issued a statement which partly reads,

The reason for the promulgation of this document now is tied to the concerns raised by some in the church that we ought to be open to other ways of salvation – for example, through the teachings of Buddha or the

³Joseph Ratzinger, “Reasons for the Christian Claim.”

⁴Joseph Ratzinger, “Reasons for the Christian Claim.”

⁵“Holy See Reminds that Dialogue Needs Clarity: Statements by Bishop Francesco Lambiasi,” *ZENIT: The World Seen from Rome* (6 September 2000), <http://www.zenit.org/english/>.

other deep Oriental mystics – or to accept the validity of other ecclesial communities besides the Catholic Church.⁶

Meanwhile, in Asia, the response was much more cautious, if not couched with Asian sensibility. The Standing Committee of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India, for example, issued a circular aimed at "toning down" the Vatican declaration. The introduction to the circular noted that *Dominus Iesus* was "hotly debated" in India. While the bishops professed their faith in the fundamental truths of Christianity, they also saw it important for Indian Catholics to remain patriotic and ensure the preservation of the best of the local cultures and other religions, all of which, the circular asserts, God uses as instruments for salvation.⁷

2. Post-Vatican II Theological Renewal

The issuance of the declaration *Dominus Iesus* is best appreciated within the context of the renewal inaugurated by the Second Vatican Council. That Vatican II was a watershed moment for theological renewal needs no further discussion. Church historian John O'Malley asserts that "never before in the history of Catholicism have so many and such sudden changes been legislated and implemented which immediately touched the lives of the faithful, and never before had such a radical adjustment of viewpoint been required of them."⁸

One of the most succinct ways to summarise the vision of the council is by reference to Pope Paul VI's encyclical *Ecclesiam Suam*, in which he instructs that the church's mission in the contemporary world has to be through the process of dialogue.⁹ Imbued with this spirit of dialogue, Catholics from all over the world began to rethink what it means to be church and what it means to be engaged with the world. New theologies evolved in the light of these reflections. Curial officials bent on conserving the church's tradition saw these developments as threatening to the deposit of faith. This, inevitably, gave rise to conflicts and tensions.

⁶Archbishop Theodore McCarrick, "The Bishops Comment on *Dominus Iesus*, A Compilation: Ways of Misunderstanding this Document," *Origins*, CNS Documentary Service (12 September 2000), <http://www.originsonline.com/>.

⁷"Bishops Note Room for 'Theological Inquiry' in Toning Down *Dominus Iesus*," UCAN (3 May 2001).

⁸John O'Malley, *Tradition and Transition: Historical Perspectives on Vatican II*, Delaware: Michael Glazier, 1989, 17.

⁹Pope Paul VI, *On the Ways in which the Church must Carry out its Mission in the Contemporary World*, (Vatican City, 6 August 1964), http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/paul_vi/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-vi_enc_06081964_ecclesiam_en.html.

The first of such tensions evolved from Latin America, with the advent of liberation theology. Dialoguing with the local culture effectively meant the engagement of the church with the massive poverty and oppression of the masses by the dictatorial regimes. The methodology advanced by liberation theology pledged to take a preferential option for the poor. When John Paul II ascended the papacy in 1978 and Joseph Ratzinger was appointed head of the CDF in 1981 the Roman Curia's suspicion over liberation theology intensified. The CDF essentially condemned liberation theology in a 1984 document *Libertatis Nuntius: "Instruction on Certain Aspects of the Theology of Liberation."*¹⁰ Years later, in an address to the presidents of the Doctrinal Commission of the Latin American bishops held in Mexico in 1996, Ratzinger said: "In the '80s, the theology of liberation in its radical forms seemed to be the most urgent challenge for the faith of the church." He then went on to assert that the fall of Communism in Eastern Europe "turned out to be a kind of twilight of the gods for that theology of redeeming political praxis."¹¹

If Ratzinger's 1996 address marked the end of the CDF's spotlight on Latin America, it also turned the spotlight's beam to shine in the direction of Asia. For, in that same address, Ratzinger remarked: "Relativism has thus become the central problem for the faith at the present time." Elaborating further, he opined:

The so-called pluralist theology of religion has been developing progressively since the '50s. Nonetheless, only now has it come to the center of the Christian conscience... On the one hand, relativism is a typical offshoot of the Western world and its forms of philosophical thought, while on the other it is connected with the philosophical and religious intuitions of Asia especially, and surprisingly, with those of the Indian subcontinent. Contact between these two worlds gives it a particular impulse at the present historical moment.¹²

¹⁰Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Instruction on Certain Aspects of the Theology of Liberation*, (Vatican City, 6 August, 1984), http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19840806_theology-liberation_en.html.

¹¹Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, "Relativism: The Central Problem for Faith Today," Address delivered during the meeting of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith with the presidents of the Doctrinal Commissions of the Bishops' Conferences of Latin America (Guadalajara, Mexico, May 1996), <https://www.catholicculture.org/culture/library/view.cfm?recnum=5180>.

¹²Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, "Relativism: The Central Problem for Faith Today."

Attempting to associate these two systems, Ratzinger explains:

The two philosophies are fundamentally different both for their departure point and for the orientation they imprint on human existence. Nonetheless, they seem to mutually confirm one another in their metaphysical and religious relativism. The religious and pragmatic relativism of Europe and America can get a kind of religious consecration from India which seems to give its renunciation of dogma the dignity of a greater respect before the mystery of God and of man. In turn, the support of European and American thought to the philosophical and theological vision of India reinforces the relativism of all the religious forms proper to the Indian heritage.¹³

3. Asia as Epicentre of the Dogma of Relativism

If the Roman Curia's interest in the theologies of religious pluralism was officially inaugurated by Cardinal Ratzinger's 1996 speech in Mexico, hints of such an interest had already been given over the years. Among the first such hints came in a statement made by Cardinal Josef Tomko, the then-Prefect of the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples. In a 1991 address to his fellow cardinals, Tomko cautioned that interreligious dialogue seemed to be leading towards "doctrinal confusion" and suggested that "although India is the epicenter to this tendency and Asia is its principal camp,... these ideas already circulate in Oceania, in some African countries and in Europe."¹⁴ The focus on India as epicentre was subsequently repeated by other curial officials. Ratzinger himself, in an address to the presidents and chairpersons of the doctrinal commissions of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences, also explicitly mentions India: "The problem which arises in India, but also elsewhere, comes to expression in Panikkar's famous phrase: 'Jesus is Christ, but Christ is not (only) Jesus.'"¹⁵

Thus, when the declaration *Dominus Iesus* was proclaimed it came as no surprise that many suspected the targets were the theologians from Asia in general and India in particular. Aside from Ratzinger's specific reference to relativistic theories being based on the "negative theology of Asia" in his introductory comments, a statement by Cardinal Edward Cassidy, the then-President of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, was also revealing. Cassidy,

¹³Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, "Relativism: The Central Problem for Faith Today."

¹⁴Josef Tomko, "Proclaiming Christ the World's Only Savior," *L'Osservatore Romano* (5 April 1991) 4.

¹⁵Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, *Christ, Faith and the Challenge of Cultures* (Hong Kong, 4 March 1993), http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/incontri/rc_con_cfaith_19930303_hong-kong-ratzinger_en.html.

in appealing to Jewish leaders who had decided to boycott a Judeo-Christian function on account of the insensitive posture taken by *Dominus Iesus*, tried to explain: "The text is not directed to the ecumenical and interreligious realm, but to the academic world." Cassidy then hit the nail on the head when he continued: "Above all, it was directed to theology professors of India, because in Asia there is a theological problem over the oneness of salvation."¹⁶

Thus, while it is perceived that *Dominus Iesus* was directed at Asia, its principal targets were actually the theologians of religious pluralism. Ratzinger's address, "Relativism: The Central Problem for Faith Today," delivered to the Latin American bishops in 1996, makes specific mention of authors of the pluralist theology of religion such as John Hick and Paul Knitter. In fact, his entire critique of what he terms as the "dogma of relativism" is based on a book synthesizing their views. His 1993 address, "Christ, Faith and the Challenge of Cultures," to the Asian bishops in Hong Kong, meanwhile, referred to Raimon Panikkar several times as the culprit perpetuating these relativistic and problematic ideas.

4. Western Theologians of Religious Pluralism

What does the theology of religious pluralism actually advocate? For starters, it no longer asks about the possibility of salvation for persons of other religions; it presumes that. It is also not preoccupied with explorations of the role other religions play in salvation; that, too, is presumed. Instead, "it seeks more deeply, in the light of Christian faith, for the meaning in God's design for humankind of the plurality of living faiths and religious traditions with which we are surrounded. Are all the religious traditions of the world destined, in God's plan, to converge? Where, when, and how?" In other words, the phenomenon of religious pluralism is considered not so much "as a matter of course and a fact of history (pluralism *de facto*) but as having a *raison d'être* in its own right (pluralism *de jure*)."¹⁷ To get a sense of the actual theologies and who Ratzinger was referring to, we will now introduce some of the leading advocates of the theology of religious pluralism.¹⁸

¹⁶Cardinal Cassidy Appeals to Jews to Renew Dialogue: Promoter of Ecumenism Believes 'Dominus Iesus' Declaration is Misunderstood," *ZENIT* (26 September, 2000).

¹⁷Jacques Dupuis, *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1997, 10-11.

¹⁸See Edmund Chia, *World Christianity Encounters World Religions: A Summa on Interfaith Dialogue*, Collegeville, MN, USA: Liturgical Press, 2018, chapter entitled "Contemporary Theologies of Religious Pluralism."

4.1. Raimon Panikkar

Born in Barcelona of a Hindu Indian father and a Roman Catholic Spanish mother, Raimon Panikkar subsequently became a Catholic priest, theologian, and scholar of Indian religions. While identifying more as an Indian, Panikkar theologizes from the West and so, at least for the purposes here, is classified among the Western theologians. One of his earliest works on interreligious dialogue is his book *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism* where he proposes that “Christ” is the universal symbol of the divine-human unity. Moreover, Christ is also not the monopoly of Christianity as, according to St Paul, it is “the name that is above every name” (Phil 2:9).¹⁹ But his most famous quote, found in the book *The Intrareligious Dialogue*, is “I ‘left’ as a Christian, I ‘found’ myself a Hindu, and I ‘return’ a Buddhist, without having ceased to be Christian.”²⁰ This describes his leaving Europe for India, immersing himself in Hinduism and Buddhism, and then returning to Europe and still remaining Christian.

Panikkar proposes five attitudes that our personal intrareligious dialogue can embrace. (i) *Exclusivism*: we believe that only our religion is true and all others are false. (ii) *Inclusivism*: we believe our own religion is true while acknowledging truth in the other religions as well. But we see ours as including all the truths that are found in the others. (iii) *Parallelism*: we believe ours to be the right path while fully cognizant that other people also believe the same about their own religion. (iv) *Interpenetration*: we realize that the different religions share a lot in common, are complementary, and also challenge one another. (v) *Pluralism*: this is an attitude which stands between unrelated plurality and a monolithic unity. This implies that, on the one hand, we are displeased with the contemporary reality where the religions are separate from one another without any relationship between them whatsoever and, on the other, that we do not support the thesis of one universal religion or that any single religion should triumph over the rest.

4.2. Paul Knitter

The five intrareligious attitudes above have been expounded upon differently, especially by means of other models. One cogent model is that presented by the American Catholic theologian Paul

¹⁹ Raimon Panikkar, *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism: Towards an Ecumenical Christophany*, London: Darton Longman & Todd, 1964.

²⁰ Raimon Panikkar, *The Intrareligious Dialogue*, Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1978, 40.

Knitter. He came to fame with his landmark book *No Other Name?*²¹ The question mark after the title raises the question as to whether Christians can still hold on to the doctrine that there is indeed no other name under heaven by which peoples of religions other than Christianity can be saved without embracing Jesus or without being baptised into the church (Acts 4:12). He reviews four models for dealing with this question, at times even identifying them with particular Christian denominations. (i) The *exclusivism* model is generally identified with the conservative Evangelical Churches, with Karl Barth as its main representative. (ii) The *inclusivism* model is identified with both the mainline Protestant Churches as well as the Roman Catholic Church.

Knitter then conflates the parallelism, interpenetration, and pluralism attitudes of Panikkar into two main models. (iii) The *theocentric* model considers not so much Christ as the means of salvation, but God. The various religions, including Christianity, are pathways to God. But while there are similarities between the religions, they are also very different ways of reaching God. Pluralism it is! It is theocentric, based on the conviction that we are ultimately saved by the one God of the universe who is the same God of the many true religions. (iv) The *soteriocentric* model attempts to respond to the criticism that not all religions have a belief in God. From the Greek word *soter*, which means saviour, the model proposes that at the core of every religion is the vision of liberation or salvation for the suffering masses. Salvation (from the Latin word *salus*, which means wholeness) is the universal aim of the various religions. Its focus therefore is on how the different religions can and must work together to alleviate the people's suffering and facilitate the liberation of humankind and that of the earth.

4.3. John Hick

The British Presbyterian philosopher John Hick is perhaps the foremost scholar who has radically embraced the theocentric and pluralist approach to other religions. He developed the "pluralistic hypothesis" as the ideal approach in apprehending the religiously ambiguous world. He expounds on this in numerous publications, more directly in *God and the Universe of Faith* – which explores the issue of religious language and God-talk as representing how the world's religions interpret the same divine reality – and *An*

²¹Paul F. Knitter, *No Other Name? A Critical Survey of Christian Attitudes toward World Religions*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1985.

Interpretation of Religion – which offers the most comprehensive presentation of his theory of religion in the context of pluralism.²²

Epistemologically, Hick's starting point is Immanuel Kant's distinction between the noumenal and the phenomenal. While the former refers to, in German, the *Ding an sich* (thing in itself) which is not completely knowable through the human mind and sensation, the latter is how the thing or reality is experienced by human beings through their culturally and historically conditioned lenses and worldviews. When speaking about God (whom Hick calls the Real), Hick makes a distinction between the noumenal ineffable Real *an sich* and the phenomenal subjective Real that is experienced by human beings. The world's religious traditions are expressing the latter, i.e., at the phenomenal level, when describing God as Yahweh, the Trinity, Allah, Shangdi, Ik Onkar, Krishna, and Vishnu. As long as we are contingent beings, the phenomenal level is the only way we can perceive as well as express reality, including the Ultimate Reality. Thus, our knowledge of God and our religious truth claims are limited and so should by no means be considered absolute. That accounts for why there is so much diversity between the religions and conflicting truth claims should be understood as incompatible only at the phenomenal level.

5. Asian Theologians of Religious Pluralism

As mentioned earlier, the Vatican curial officials charged that the problematic aspects of the theologies of religious pluralism were arising from both the West and the East (read: Asia). To be sure, numerous Asian theologians have files with the CDF, some of whom were officially censured by the Vatican. Of these cases, three stand out as most significant for the Church in Asia, especially vis-à-vis the theologies of religious pluralism.

5.1. Tissa Balasuriya

A priest of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate (OMI) order, Fr Tissa Balasuriya published a book entitled *Mary and Human Liberation* in 1990.²³ A few years later, after a series of investigation, the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Sri Lanka issued a statement to warn against the book's content, citing incompatibility with "the faith of the Church regarding the doctrine of revelation and its transmission,

²²John Hick, *God and the Universe of Faith: Essays in the Philosophy of Religion*, London: Macmillan, 1973; *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent*, New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1989.

²³Tissa Balasuriya, "Mary and Human Liberation," *Logos* 29 (March/July 1990).

Christology, soteriology and Mariology.”²⁴ The CDF subsequently took over the investigation and, in 1997, a *Notification* was issued declaring that Balasuriya had incurred excommunication *latae sententiae* or automatic excommunication. On account of the reactions and protests from all over the world, the CDF rescinded the excommunication a year later and Balasuriya was formally reconciled with the church.

What was it that got Balasuriya into such trouble? In his excommunication, coming as it did within months of Ratzinger’s 1996 “Relativism” speech in Mexico, it is not surprising that “relativism” was the central critique. The *Notification* alleged that “Fr. Balasuriya does not recognize the supernatural, unique and irrepeatable character of the revelation of Jesus Christ, by placing its presuppositions on the same level as those of other religions.” He is accused of denying “the nature of Catholic dogma” and charged with the “relativizing of the revealed truths contained in them.” The *Notification* specifically alleges that “the author relativizes Christological dogma” and imputes that Balasuriya speaks of Jesus in terms “whose divine sonship is never explicitly recognized... and whose salvific function is only doubtfully acknowledged.” It also charges that “Fr. Balasuriya reduces salvation... and so denies the necessity of Baptism.” Furthermore, it alleges that “a fundamental aspect of the thought of Fr. Balasuriya is the denial of the dogma of original sin” and that “the author arrives at the point of denying in particular, the Marian dogmas.” On his part, Balasuriya denied all the charges. A process of dialogue ensued and he signed a statement affirming that “doctrinal errors were perceived in my writing and therefore provoked negative reactions from other parties, affected relationships and led to unfortunate polarization in the ecclesial community. I truly regret the harm this caused.”²⁵ In effect, Balasuriya regretted the harm caused by the perceptions of errors and the negative reactions and not so much any error on his part.

5.2. Anthony de Mello

An Indian Jesuit who died at the young age of 56 in 1987, Anthony de Mello had his books investigated posthumously, more than ten years after his death. A counsellor and theologian, de Mello is well-

²⁴Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Notification Concerning the Text ‘Mary and Human Liberation’ by Fr. Tissa Balasuriya, O.M.I.* (Vatican City, 27 December 1996), http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19970102_tissa-balasuriya_en.html.

²⁵ Tissa Balasuriya, “A Thank You and an Interim Reflection on the Reconciliation,” *EAPR* 35, 2 (1998) 250.

known as a spiritual writer and retreat master, not only in India but throughout the English-speaking world as well. In 1998 the CDF issued a *Notification* “in order to protect the good of the Christian faithful” as they had found that de Mello’s theological positions “are incompatible with the Catholic faith and can cause grave harm.” In the *Explanatory Note* which accompanied the *Notification* the CDF introduced de Mello’s works as almost always taking “the form of short anecdotes presented in an accessible and easy-to-read style.” It acknowledged that de Mello’s earlier works, “while revealing the influence of Buddhist and Taoist spiritual currents,... remained in many respects within the boundaries of Christian spirituality.” Nevertheless, even in these earlier works “and to a greater degree in his later publications, one notices a progressive distancing from the essential contents of the Christian faith.” In conclusion, the *Explanatory Note* states, “those responsible for safeguarding the doctrine of the faith have been obliged to illustrate the dangers in the texts written by Father Anthony de Mello or attributed to him, and to warn the faithful about them.”²⁶

In response, the bishops of India issued a statement entitled “Pastoral Guidelines on the Writings of Late Fr. Tony de Mello.” It begins by acknowledging the “authentic potential for good from Fr. Tony’s publications” and went on to recount the testimony of those who “knew him and heard him with profit especially when he preached a retreat to the Bishops of India.” It then informed that the “Bishops of India read Fr. Tony’s words and interpret his writings in [the] context of the very complex Indian religio-cultural situation from which Fr. Tony wrote and spoke.” The statement also spoke about “India’s religio-cultural history over the past fifty years in which fanatical religious fundamentalism and communalism have caused hundreds of thousands of killings in God’s name.” In such a context, “texts of scriptures and popular traditions have been twisted... so as to legitimize such human rights’ violations as untouchability, child marriages, exorbitant dowries and so-called self-immolations of widows and new brides.” De Mello’s aim was “to facilitate an awakening so that persons could live more authentically with the inner freedom of God’s children as promised them by the Gospel.” The statement clarified that de Mello “was not writing books of theology.” He used the “medium of story-telling,... an

²⁶Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Notification: Concerning the Writings of Father Anthony De Mello, sj* (Vatican City, 24 June 1998), http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19980624_demello_en.html.

eastern tradition of imparting wisdom," even if at times this may seem inadequate, especially "when it comes to precision of thought and clarity of expression." The bishops, however, acknowledged that de Mello's "understanding of divine revelation as mainly new awareness and consciousness is admittedly weak when measured up against a clear fidelity to the teaching of the Church."²⁷ Finally, unlike the CDF which ends by "warning the faithful" about the "dangers in the texts written by Father Anthony de Mello," the Indian bishops end by reasserting "the good these writings have done to many readers, both Christians and others."²⁸

5.3. Jacques Dupuis

A Belgian who went to India in 1948 to join the Jesuit scholasticate, Jacques Dupuis was to remain in India for almost forty years, during which time he taught in various universities and seminaries. Since 1984 Dupuis has been teaching in Rome where he wrote the book *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism*, which was published in 1997. Soon after, the CDF initiated a process against the book and, finally, on 1 September 2000, Dupuis received an advanced copy of *Dominus Iesus* and a draft of a *Notification* concerning his book. He was instructed to sign the *Notification* which charged that his book contains "serious errors" against the faith.²⁹

On 5 September 2000, as discussed earlier, *Dominus Iesus* was released. That the two events were happening at around the same time suggests that the *Declaration* was indeed targeted towards Dupuis' works. Dupuis, who feels he continues to be very much "identified with Asian thinking, especially with Indian theology,"³⁰ suspects that in his investigation the CDF's concerns were much more general. He senses that it is the Asian theologians who were the primary concern and his investigation was but a message that they should "stop spreading such ideas that salvation is possible through other religions, or that the other religions can also be recipients of revelation, etc."³¹ What precisely were the CDF's concerns about Dupuis' works? In Dupuis' own words, the first *Notification*

²⁷Standing Committee of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India, "Pastoral Guidelines on the Writings of Late Fr. Tony de Mello," *Vidyajyoti* 63 (August 1999) 606-607.

²⁸Standing Committee of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India, "Pastoral Guidelines on the Writings of Late Fr. Tony de Mello," 611.

²⁹See an interview entitled "Justice Denied, Delayed, Truth Exposed: The Inside Story of the Unfair Dealings with J. Dupuis, in a free-wheeling interview exclusively given to ICAN," *Indian Currents Associate News* (15 April 2001) 10-16.

³⁰"Justice Denied, Delayed, Truth Exposed...," 14.

³¹"Justice Denied, Delayed, Truth Exposed...," 15.

specifically mentioned “serious errors against essential elements of Divine and Catholic faith” especially in the areas of “the doctrines on Incarnation, Trinity, Revelation.”³² This was later amended to “ambiguities and difficulties” concerning the “interpretation of the sole and universal salvific mediation of Christ, the unicity and completeness of Christ’s revelation, the universal salvific action of the Holy Spirit, the orientation of all people to the Church, and the value and significance of the salvific function of other religions.” Dupuis signed the *Notification* as it merely charged that his book contains “notable ambiguities and difficulties on important doctrinal points, which *could lead* a reader to erroneous or harmful opinions”³³ [emphasis added].

Conclusion

As can be seen from the discussion above, the Vatican’s response to the theologies of religious pluralism took the form of the *Declaration Dominus Iesus*. The *Declaration* singles out the dangerous influence from what it alleges are “relativistic” theories advanced in the context of interreligious dialogue, giving rise to pluralistic theologies. It regards the theologies of religious pluralism as bordering upon this relativism. While both Western and Asian theologians were equally accused of advocating relativism, it is mostly the latter who were officially condemned.

Hence, it is not an exaggeration to suggest that *Dominus Iesus* was promulgated specifically for Asia. Its impact on the church in general and the Asian Church in particular is definitely consequential. It is therefore a document truly significant for the future of Asian theologies. At the very least it testifies to the fact that the phenomenon of religious pluralism is a reality that the Church in Asia has to deal with and that Asian theologians have indeed been leading the way in their construction of theologies of religious pluralism.

³²“Justice Denied, Delayed, Truth Exposed...,” 11.

³³Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Notification on the book Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism* (Orbis Books: Maryknoll, New York 1997) by Father Jacques Dupuis, S.J. (Vatican City, 24 January 2001), http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20010312_dupuis-2_en.html.