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LEARNING INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE FROM JACQUES DUPUIS FOR THE ASIAN CONTEXT

Udo Goebel[♦]

Ateneo de Manila University, Manila

Abstract

Hans Küng is famous to have lived by the following principle: “no peace among the nations without peace among the religions. No dialogue between the religions without investigation of the foundations of the religions.”¹ If we are to take this seriously, we need to look at the situation in the world, especially in the multicultural, and multi-religious background of Asia, specifically South-East Asia and the Philippines, and continue our dialogue with others.

This study reviews the development of Jacques Dupuis’ theology as articulated in his book *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism*, which was published in 1997. This article will introduce the reader to Dupuis’ theology as well as his historical assessment of *extra ecclesiam nulla salus*. The accusations and ensuing controversy that surrounded the writings of Dupuis will be briefly mentioned as well as a response.

[♦]**Dr Udo Goebel** is currently assistant professor in the department of Theology at Ateneo de Manila University in Manila, Philippines. He completed his doctorate in 2009 in Dogmatics at the Loyola School of Theology, Ateneo de Manila. Dr Udo Goebel was born and raised in Germany but received most of his theological education in the United States. He has been teaching in the Philippines at various seminaries since 2000. As a protestant, he is especially interested in interreligious dialogue, the study of the historical and theological contributions of Martin Luther. Most recently he has been researching the pedagogical application of Søren Kierkegaard. Email: ugoebel@ateneo.edu

¹Hans Küng, *Islam: Past, Present & Future*, Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2007, xxiii.

I. Introduction

Hans Küng is famous to have lived by the following principle: “no peace among the nations without peace among the religions. No peace among the religions without dialogue between the religions. No dialogue between the religions without investigation of the foundations of the religions.”² If we are to take this seriously, we need to look at the situation in the world, especially in the multicultural, and multi-religious background of Asia, specifically South-East Asia and the Philippines, and continue our dialogue with others.

Recent history demands this as well. Urbanization and globalization are developments that urge us to dialogue with people of others faiths that live in our neighbourhood. Continuous tension within the political and socio-economic arena should also drive us towards interreligious dialogue.

Roger Haight was denounced by the Vatican following the release of his book, *Jesus: Symbol of God*. He commented this as follows: “My fear is that educated Catholics will walk out if there isn’t space for an open attitude to other religions.”³ Roger Haight seems to express a common perception of Christian scholars in regards to the encounter of people of other Faiths. What ought to be a correct, yet sensitive perspective toward other religious traditions? And, will people simply walk away from Christianity if we do not learn to become more tolerant? What does it mean to have an “open attitude”?

A variety of perspectives to this question have been proposed in recent years. Within the evangelical world we have scholars such as Clark Pinnock and John Sanders. We have John Hick, Gavin D’Costa, and George Lindbeck. All of these scholars come from a mostly western perspective. This article wants to highlight a somewhat lesser known yet prominent scholar, who not only comes from the Roman Catholic but also spent close to 40 years as a missionary in India, therefore looking at this topic from a more Asian perspective.

This present study reviews the development of Jacques Dupuis’ theology as articulated in his book *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism*, which was published in 1997. This article will introduce the reader to Dupuis’ theology, Dupuis’ historical assessment of *extra ecclesiam nulla salus*, and attempt to give a brief response.

²Hans Küng, *Islam: Past, Present & Future*, xxiii.

³http://natcath.org/NCR_Online/archives2/2005a/022505/022505a.php, retrieved 04/03/13.

II. Introduction to Jacques Dupuis' Thought

First, it is important to understand Jacques Dupuis' understanding of the topic. In his book *Jesus Christ at the Encounter of World Religions*, published in 1991, the author attempts to retain the traditionally held belief of the Church that Jesus Christ holds a central role in the economy of salvation, while at the "same time integrate, in their difference, the religious experiences of the living traditions and assign to those traditions a positive role and significance in the overall plan of God for humankind, as it unfolds through salvation history."⁴ The following two principles form the foundation for inter-religious cooperation: 1) God wills that all be saved, and 2) All salvation is in and through Jesus Christ. How is that to be realized?

Therefore, in his introduction to the book *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism*, Dupuis begins by defining the terms which provide the title of this book.

Theology

For Dupuis, Theology is a historical-salvific study of religion and religions, and quotes Boulik who suggests that "it offers an interpretation of religions in the light of the Word of God, with the help of faith-experience and within the perspective of history of salvation, of which Christ is the Beginning (Alpha) and the End (Omega)."⁵ Within the study of theology of religions, Dupuis sees as Anselm's axiom *faith seeking understanding* as an integral part within any theological endeavor.

A Christian Theology

While traditionally it was believed that Theology is a science reserved for Christianity, it has become clear in recent years, that this can no longer be viewed in such a way. Recognizing that theology is not exclusively Christian, it is then important to realize that different religions have different theologies. Therefore, while Dupuis suggests that his Theology of World Religion is Christian in nature, it must leave room for other confessional theologies, may they be Muslim or Hindu. Therefore a Christian Theology needs to adopt a global perspective and allow different interpretations of Theology to be viewed positively and as springboards, useful for interreligious cooperation.

⁴Jacques Dupuis, *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism*, Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1997, 1.

⁵Jacques Dupuis, *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism*, 5.

A Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism

A Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism seeks to understand and explain the plurality of religious experiences with their creedal, cultic and moral articulation from a Christian perspective. Further, "it seeks to interpret the existential experience of the 'others' in the light of the Christian faith and the mystery of Jesus Christ." This leads one to answer the question of how the religious traditions of "others" fit into the salvific plan of the Christian tradition for humankind.

Theology of Religious Pluralism

According to Dupuis, a Theology of Religious Pluralism no longer merely sees religious pluralism as a historic fact, but seeks to define the meaning and causes for their existence and their significance in God's design. Further, it seeks to understand if there is a possibility of convergence, of mutual enrichment and cross-fertilization.⁶

"Toward"

In the process of theologizing about a Theology of Religious Pluralism, expressed by *Toward*, Dupuis attempts to express that this is an ongoing and open process without any definite resolution. It must build on the historical discussion if the Christian tradition incorporates recent developments in order to propose possible solutions. This is necessary in order to overcome the negative attitudes that have dominated the past while staying in touch with the Christian tradition.

III. Dupuis' Historical Assessment of *Extra Ecclesiam Nulla Salus*

The traditional approach of the Christian Church has been defined by the axiom, *extra ecclesiam nulla salus*. The axiom is clear in its definition that there is no salvation outside the Church, leaving no room for an inclusivist view of other religious traditions. However the implications of the axiom have changed due to different emerging interpretations and applications. In this section, Dupuis enters into a lengthy discussion of the Church's view of its role in the salvation of humankind based on the evolving axiom in order to allow salvation for those outside the Christian religious tradition.

The Church Fathers and St Augustine

In his book, *Against Heresies*, Irenaeus addresses the issue of those that have separated themselves from the Church or were

⁶Jacques Dupuis, *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism*, 11.

excommunicated from the Church due to heresies. He warns them, specifically the Gnostics, by saying that due to their separation from the Church, they will be deprived of salvation. He says that “Where the Church is, there is the Spirit of God, and where the Spirit is, there is the Church.”⁷ In other words, those outside the Church are cut off from the Spirit and therefore are deprived of salvation.

Dupuis continues his historical assessment by showing that Cyprian further develops the same thought of Irenaeus, by arguing that the axiom is applicable specifically to those that the Church considered as heretics and schismatic. The assessment is such that neither Irenaeus nor Cyprian, had pagans in mind when making statements concerning the salvific exclusion of those that were outside the Church. It is interesting to note that it was not until after Christianity had changed from a persecuted minority to being the dominant force within the Roman Empire with the reign of Emperor Constantine that the meaning of the axiom began to include Jews and pagans. This can be seen in assessing the development that is to follow during the fourth and fifth century.

The most rigid application of the axiom that there is no salvation outside the Church is found in Fulgentius of Ruspe during the fifth century. Fulgentius applied the axiom to not only schismatics and heretics, but also to Jews and pagans by declaring that the Church “mostly firmly hold[s] and by no means doubt[s], that not only all pagans, but also all Jews, and all heretics and schismatics who die outside the Catholic Church, will go to the eternal fire that was prepared for the devil and his angels.”⁸ This interpretation of the axiom lays the foundation for the centuries to come.

The Church’s Magisterium

During the time following the early Church, there were several events, particularly documents, which greatly influenced the interpretation of the axiom to the point at which the axiom was believed to have dogmatic meaning.

The first document, the letter of Pope Innocent II to the archbishop of Tarragona in 1208, states that “we heartily believe and orally confess the one Church, not of heretics, but the Holy, Roman, Catholic, apostolic (Church), outside which we believe no one can be

⁷Jacques Dupuis, *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism*, 86.

⁸Jacques Dupuis, *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism*, 92.

saved.”⁹ The uniqueness to this document is that it refers to the Roman Catholic Church as the institution which holds the key to salvation, a reference that went beyond the articulation of the early Church.

The second occasion, the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215, again states that “there is indeed one universal Church of the faithful outside which no one at all is saved, in which the priest himself, Jesus Christ, is also the sacrifice.”¹⁰

The third document, according to Dupuis the most important document in the history of the axiom, goes beyond asserting that there is no salvation outside the Church by claiming that submission to the Pope is further necessary for salvation. According to Dupuis, this sentence that submission to the pope is necessary for salvation,

has commonly been regarded as dogmatic and binding. But it must be distinguished from the body of the document, which develops an ideology bound to the concepts of the time and a prevalently judicial and corporate notion of the Church, exalting in the process the role of the pope as head of the Church... nevertheless, the extent of the dogmatic value of its conclusion remains open to various interpretations.¹¹

Dupuis follows the interpretation of Sullivan by quoting him as follows:

We can conclude by noting that no Catholic theologian now holds that Boniface’s theory about the supremacy of the spiritual over the temporal power is a dogma of Catholic faith. It is safe to say that if the bull defined anything, it was simply the traditional doctrine that there is no salvation outside the Catholic Church.¹²

The fourth document, pertinent to the historical development of the axiom is the decree set forth at the council of Florence in 1442. This document falls back on the formulation of Fulgentius of Ruspe in his *Treatise on Faith*. Dupuis summarizes the development of the axiom during the Middle Ages with the following formulation that “Jesus Christ is the final revelation of God; his mission is entrusted to the Church; thus, separation from the Church means separation from Christ and hence loss of salvation.”¹³

⁹Jacques Dupuis, *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism*, 93.

¹⁰Jacques Dupuis, *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism*, 93.

¹¹Jacques Dupuis, *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism*, 95.

¹²Francis Sullivan, *Salvation outsider the Church? Tracing the History of the Catholic Repsonse*, New York: Paulist Press, 1992, as quoted in Jacques Dupuis, *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism*, 95.

¹³Jacques Dupuis, *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism*, 95

The Meaning of the Axiom Today

According to Dupuis, due to different circumstances that persist in our world today, one needs to ask the question whether there is still any value for this axiom. Dupuis argues that the axiom can no longer hold the same meaning as it held during its historical development. He argues that the conditions that were present at the time the axiom was first pronounced, which was the belief that all people of the known world have had the chance to hear the Christian message, no longer apply today. Beginning with the discovery of the new Americas in 1492, the Church began to open the eyes to new horizons. Therefore, since the condition in which the axiom was first formulated no longer exists today, namely that all people have had a chance to hear the Christian message and exclusion from salvation was only for those that were culpable due to heresies. Therefore, Dupuis concludes that the traditional interpretation of the axiom, that there is no salvation outside the Church, no longer holds any validity today. Dupuis supports this conclusion by quoting several prominent catholic theologians. First, he quotes Küng who suggests that,

in its negative and exclusive formulation [the axiom] was highly dubious right from the beginning, has resulted in more or less serious errors, and has proved open to misunderstanding in its application to non-Christians and impossible to understand at all in its application to non-Catholic Christians... As far as others [than Roman Catholic Christians] are concerned, we do better to use a positive formulation: "Salvation inside the Church," and so emphasize the positive truth at the heart of the easily misunderstood axiom.¹⁴

Further he concurs with Congar who argued that,

the Church is the only institution created and commanded by God to obtain for people the salvation which is in Jesus Christ; the Church has received from her founder and Lord all that is necessary to obtain the salvation of the whole of humankind... there is no longer a question of applying the formula to any concrete person... [The axiom] is no longer regarded as answering the question 'Who will be saved?' but [...] the question: 'What is it that is commissioned to discharge the mystery of salvation?'"¹⁵

¹⁴Hans Küng, *The Church*, New York: Burns and Oates, 1968, as quoted by Jacques Dupuis, *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism*, 95.

¹⁵Yves Congar, *The Wide World My Parish: Salvation and its Problems*, London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1961, as quoted by Jacques Dupuis, *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism*, 95.

The conclusion of the discussion is that the traditional idea that the Church is the “Arch of salvation” outside which there is no salvation, is no longer applicable and has to be interpreted differently to take account of the changed circumstances. From this conclusion, having removed the negative approach that has dominated much of the history of Christianity, Jaques Dupuis is then able to enter into the dialogue with other religious traditions to discover the positive value of other religious traditions. That the Church recognizes the positive value in the economy of salvation within non-Christian religious traditions has had its official beginning with the pronouncements of the Second Vatican Council during the early 1960’s. This will be the focus of the following section.

IV. Theological Perspectives Surrounding Vatican II

The debate beginning with the Second Vatican Council entered into an entirely new era. No longer did the debate centre around the question if salvation was possible outside the Church, but rather, how salvation was possible and actualized within other religious traditions. At the time of the Second Vatican Council, two propositions were present, first “The Fulfilment Theory” and second, the theory of “The Mystery of Christ in the Religious Traditions.” In regards to these propositions, Dupuis assesses the situation surrounding the Council by arguing that

where the other religions were concerned, the council’s intention consisted of fostering between them and Christianity new attitudes of mutual understanding, esteem, dialogue, and cooperation. To foster such attitudes it did not seem necessary to opt for one particular position in the present debate on the theology of religions. The council quite deliberately had no intention of doing so... The intention, on the contrary, was to rally the highest possible majority on the council floor in favor of a change of attitude of Christians and the Church toward the members of the other religions. Such an aim could not be put in jeopardy by entering into intricate theological discussions.¹⁶

The main goal of the Vatican II, therefore, was not to attempt to settle the issue, but rather trying to foster positive attitudes towards other religions and to open doors for mutual understanding, esteem, dialogue, and cooperation.

Magisterial Declarations

The Roman Catholic Church made several official declarations concerning the treatment of other religions surrounding Vatican II.

¹⁶Jacques Dupuis, *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism*, 159.

Dupuis points out, that two questions must be clearly distinguished. The question that salvation was possible to individuals belonging to other religions had long been affirmed before the Second Vatican Council. However, the question of the significance of other religious traditions and the world in general had thus far not been clearly been established. Dupuis argues that a new optimistic approach reflected the teaching of the council concerning salvation outside the Church, expressed as *Heilsoptimismus*. The documents published include *Lumen Gentium* and *Nostra Aetate*. Dupuis argues that in these texts “the council develops the following themes: 1) the salvation of people outside the Church, 2) the authentic values found in non-Christians and in their religious traditions; and 3) the Church’s appreciation of these values and the consequent attitude which it takes toward the religious traditions and their members.”¹⁷ A closer look at the above mentioned documents will help shed light on these themes.

Lumen Gentium

The dogmatic constitution *Lumen Gentium*, (Light of Nations, November 21, 1964) affirms that the

plan of salvation also includes those who acknowledge the Creator. In the first place amongst these there are the Mohamedans, who, professing to hold the faith of Abraham, along with us adore the one and merciful God, who on the last day will judge mankind. Nor is God far distant from those who in shadows and images seek the unknown God, for it is He who gives to all men life and breath and all things, (Acts 17:25-28) and as Savior wills that all men be saved (1 Tim 2:4). Those also can attain to salvation who through no fault of their own do not know the Gospel of Christ or His Church, yet sincerely seek God and moved by grace strive by their deeds to do His will as it is known to them through the dictates of conscience (LG, 16).

The text goes on to say that “whatever good or truth is found amongst them is looked upon by the Church as a preparation for the Gospel (c.f. Eusebius of Caesarea, *Praeparatio evangelica* I, 1)” (LG, 16). The document then, affirms that God’s assistance for salvation is available both to people of other religious traditions, but also to those who have not arrived at an explicit knowledge of God, without any fault of their own, yet strive to lead a good life.¹⁸

This means that salvation is possible with Christ, but without the gospel.

¹⁷Jacques Dupuis, *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism*, 162.

¹⁸Jacques Dupuis, *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism*, 162.

Nostra Aetate

Nostra Aetate, (In Our Time, October 28, 1965), deals specifically with “The Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions.” The statement proposes that “in her task of promoting unity and love among men, indeed among nations, she [the Church] considers above all in this declaration what men have in common and what draws them to fellowship” (NA, 1). Further, the Church affirms in regards to Buddhism and Hinduism that

the Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in these religions. She regards with sincere reverence those ways of conduct and of life, those precepts and teachings which, though differing in many aspects from the ones she holds and sets forth, nonetheless often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men. Indeed, she proclaims, and ever must proclaim Christ “the way, the truth, and the life” (John 14:6), in whom men may find the fullness of religious life, in whom God has reconciled all things to Himself (NA, 5).

Having seen the original texts of the Second Vatican Council, and having seen that the Church acknowledges the positive value found in other religions, the elements of truth and the rays of light, an examination of the two emerging approaches is now necessary. Both approaches claimed reputable theologians as their endorsers.

Fulfilment Theories

First, the fulfilment theories have such notable theologians like Jean Danielou, Henry de Lubac and Hans Urs von Balthasar. These theories are “built upon the allegedly insuperable dichotomies, such as between the human and the Divine, the personal and impersonal, the claim to self-liberation and God-given salvation.”¹⁹ Other religions, therefore, were viewed as stepping-stones, finding their fulfilment in the Christ of Christianity.²⁰

The Mystery of Christ in the Religious Traditions

This second theory of how the elements of truths of other religious traditions can become effective is articulated, among others, by the following theologians: Karl Rahner on “Anonymous Christians,” Raimon Panikkar on the “Unknown Christ” and Hans Küng on “Ways of Salvation.” Jacques Dupuis summarizes these approaches as follows: “for those views, the members of those traditions are

¹⁹Jacques Dupuis, *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism*, 143.

²⁰See NA, 5: Christ ...in whom men may find the fullness of religious life, in whom God has reconciled all things to Himself.

saved by Christ not in spite of their religious allegiance and sincere practice of their tradition but through that allegiance and practice. There is, then, salvation without the gospel, although none without Christ or apart from him.”²¹ Again we see that salvation is possible outside the boundaries of the Church, however, not without Christ or apart from him.

V. Conclusion

In recent decades the limits of interreligious dialogue have been further redefined. Father Jacques Dupuis is considered as one of the most influential Catholic scholars to have contributed to this dialogue, by working as a Missionary in India, teaching at the Gregorian University in Rome and writing scholarly books, among others, *Christianity and the Religions*, and the book which has been the focus of this present study, *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism*.

However, in November of 2000, Jacques Dupuis received a notification concerning his book *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism* from the Congregation of Faith and Doctrine, the theological watchdog of the Roman Catholic Church, under the guidance of Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI, then Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger. This notification, which was received and signed by Father Jacques Dupuis, acknowledged that while the author attempted to remain faithful to the doctrine of the Catholic Church and the teaching of the Magisterium, the book nevertheless

contained notable ambiguities and difficulties on important doctrinal points, which could lead a reader to erroneous or harmful opinions.[...] these points concerned 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.²²

By acknowledging the receipt of the notification, Jacques Dupuis expressed not only his assent to the notification but also his willingness to agree with the teaching of the Church in any future writings. Although Father Dupuis accepted the content of the doctrinal note, he continued to argue his work was misinterpreted. He was quoted to have said: “I do not uphold these false theories.”²³

²¹Jacques Dupuis, *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism*, 143.

²²http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20010124_dupuis_en.html, Accessed April 3, 2014.

²³<http://www.cwnews.com/news/viewstory.cfm?recnum=34318>. Accessed April 3, 2014.

The notification concerning Dupuis articulates the official teaching of the Magisterium based on the constitution of the Church, *Lumen Gentium* and the recent document *Dominus Iesus*, published in 2000. He states the Church's position as follows:

It is therefore legitimate to maintain that the Holy Spirit accomplishes salvation in non-Christians also through those elements of truth and goodness present in the various religions; however, to hold that these religions, considered as such, are ways of salvation, has no foundation in Catholic theology, also because they contain omissions, insufficiencies and errors regarding fundamental truths about God, man and the world.²⁴

In conclusion, it was unfortunate the treatment that was given to Jacques Dupuis. However, while unfair as some may say, the accomplishments made by Jacques Dupuis' research remain invaluable for future generations as well as the interaction of those of different faiths and the dialogue.

²⁴http://ncronline.org/NCR_Online/documents/notification.htm. Accessed January 30, 2006.