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## Theological Pluralism as Repressive Tolerance

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## THEOLOGICAL PLURALISM AS REPRESSIVE TOLERANCE

Jeevadhara Journal of Theology  
Symposium on the Declaration *Dominus Iesus*  
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Loyola Marymount University

In a letter to Cardinal Roger Mahoney, Archbishop of Los Angeles, members of the Hindu-Roman Catholic dialogue group responded to *Dominus Iesus* and the scandal it has created both in India and in the United States. The letter informed the Cardinal that the non-Roman Catholics among us “resist any attempt to be converted to the Roman Catholic faith,” a reference to the declaration’s claim that interreligious dialogue is “part of the Church’s evangelizing mission” [§2]. The signatories to the letter go on to state that while they “understand the need for faiths to hold firm within their own belief systems,” even still, they “find contradictory the notion ... that there can be equality of persons but no equality of doctrinal content.” This statement I take to be a statement of support for a “pluralist” model of religious diversity which *Dominus Iesus* sharply rejects. This letter, which was signed not only by the Hindu participants in the dialogue group but also by some of its Catholic members, is illustrative of the struggle currently taking place within the Roman Catholic church both in the United States, where I do my ministry as a theologian, and also in India, where I have never been. The letter singles out problems having to do with the practice of interreligious dialogue and also the pluralist theology of religions. I think these two issues are intimately related.

THEOLOGICAL PLURALISM

With its mean-spirited words in regard to other religious paths, *Dominus Iesus* has given scandal to the faithful. Although I must protest its harsh rhetoric, I am in fundamental agreement with the declaration's rejection of pluralist theologies of religion. Catholic Christianity does not claim that Vaisnavite or Shaivite Hindus are strangers to Christ. For all its tacklessness, *Dominus Iesus* does not claim this either. Neither does Roman Catholic Christianity claim that Christ is but one way among others to salvation. Christian pluralists who take this position in dialogue with Hindu believers should make very clear to their dialogue partners that this view does not accurately represent the Christian tradition.

There is another objection to pluralist theologies not mentioned in the document, an objection that makes pluralist theologies particularly important to the church in the United States and perhaps to the church in India as well. Theologies of religious pluralism are examples of what Herbert Marcuse has called, with irony, "repressive tolerance."<sup>1</sup> In the West, tolerance can be misused ideologically to obscure the moral and political implications of difference and to suppress social criticism. Marcuse recognizes this as a particularly subtle and sophisticated form of repression.

Pluralist theologies are a form of repressive tolerance, at least in the West. These theologies function ideologically to legitimize western modernity and its social structures. For example, western societies have been very successful in protecting themselves from Christian social criticism by privatizing

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<sup>1</sup> See Herbert Marcuse, "Repressive Tolerance," in *A Critique of Pure Tolerance*, by Robert Wolff, Barrington Moore, and Herbert Marcuse, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1965), pp. 81-123.

belief. In doing so, pluralist theologies serve the agenda of modernity. If all religions are equally valid paths leading to the same transcendent truth, then religious belief becomes a personal matter of subjective opinion or temperament. Once privatized, religion can then become yet another commodity to be consumed by individuals who make choices about not only what brand of soap they wish to purchase, but what religion they wish to practice. The privatization of religion becomes repressive when public claims to superiority or normativity by religious groups are castigated as “intolerance.”

### THEOLOGICAL PLURALISM IN INDIA

India, of course, has its own, Hindu-based, pluralist theologies. Might pluralist theologies be form of repressive tolerance in India? The reflections that follow, I hope, will be taken as probings offered in the interest of a deeper discussion of the meaning of *Dominus Iesus* for the church in India.

Stanley Samartha, writing in 1987, calls all Christians to accept what he calls India’s “normative plurality” which has led to a “particular attitude toward religious dissent.” As an example, he mentions the way Hinduism has been able “to overcome the challenge of the Buddha.” Happily, at least for Samartha, Buddhism has been “co-opted into the Hindu structure of the *avatars*.”<sup>2</sup> In Samartha’s view, early Buddhism’s rejection of Vedic authority and Brahmanical

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<sup>2</sup> "The Cross and the Rainbow: Christ in a Multi-religious Culture," in *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness: Toward a Pluralistic Theology of Religions*, Hick and Knitter eds. (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1987), p. 73.

claims to caste superiority were a cause of social disturbance within India. The Buddhist community was rendered more palatable by means of a Hindu pluralist theology. The distinctiveness of Buddhist *dharma* was incorporated within Indian society as yet another current in the great river of truth in a way that undermined the Buddhist critique of Brahmanism. From my North American context, I am baffled that Samartha finds this “co-opting” and “overcoming” of Buddhism praiseworthy. Certainly, the history of western colonialism and neo-colonialism provides a context for assessing the meaning of *Dominus Iesus* for the church in India. Does not the fate of Buddhism also provide a context for assessing the document?

### DOMINUS IESUS AND INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE

Faced with this pastoral and theological challenge, does *Dominus Iesus* constitute a resource for the church in India? I would think not. In North America at least, Christians very much need to develop practical and theological skills in regard to dialogue with their non-Christian neighbors. I speak of a dialogue that honors religious differences and recognizes in those differences genuine theological significance for Christian believers. *Dominus Iesus* has almost nothing to say about interreligious dialogue. The declaration’s sole statement on the matter is to be found in section two, where dialogue is seen as part of the Church’s evangelizing mission [§2]. Shamefully, *Dominus Iesus* is all too representative of the underdevelopment of official church teachings regarding the nature and practice of interreligious dialogue. The irresponsibly harsh

language the declaration uses in regard to believers who follow other paths has been a cause of scandal. In the long run, perhaps the greater scandal lies in the poverty of what this document has to say about the theology and practice of interreligious dialogue.

Who will teach the church how to dialogue? Here, the Indian church can offer a great service to the church beyond its borders. This will not be the case if Indian theologians adopt a pluralist theology of religions, for these theologies undermine the value of interreligious dialogue by insisting that tolerance among religious believers can be achieved only when the religions themselves jettison anything of real theological significance that would set them apart from any other religion as unique and unsurpassed. "Tolerance" is achieved by means of the suppression of genuine differences. If the differences that distinguish religions are of no real soteriological significance, then no religion need be taken seriously as genuinely different position that might call my faith into question or enrich my faith. In this, pluralist theologies reveal their collusion with the repressive tolerance of western modernity and perhaps – I leave this as an open question – modern India as well.