

On “Dominus Iesus”—for delivery at the Catholic Theological Society of America, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, 8th June 2001. Paul J. Griffiths, Schmitt Professor of Catholic Studies, University of Illinois at Chicago.

“Dominus Iesus” (DI) was released into the world on 5th September last, to immediate howls of protest. I had the dubious pleasure of appearing on a radio phone-in talk show to discuss the document a couple of days after its release: the host began by asking me to explain why the Catholic Church had released a document teaching that all non-Catholics are damned. This took my breath away for a moment, at least until I asked him whether he’d read the document. It turned out that neither he nor his call-ins had done so, which seemed to have no inhibiting effect upon their willingness to express opinions about it. Some of the Catholic press was not much better, proclaiming in banner headlines such chimeras as a new Vatican crackdown on inter-religious dialogue. So at the very least, DI created a brief but intense public relations difficulty for the Church. This, thankfully, has now largely died away, and it is perhaps now possible to offer some more mature and useful theological comment upon the document. And that’s what I’d like to offer in the few minutes available to me.

I’ll begin by noting that DI is a teaching text of some considerable magisterial weight, a text toward whose claims the faithful are intended to show at least obsequium religiosum even if not complete agreement. The document demands from theologians at least a theological response, as well as an attitude of respectful submission, and I intend that the following remarks should provide evidence of both. I believe and hope, too, that the theological response is the better because of the attitude that informs and grounds it.

DI is for the most part a deeply traditional document. It says nothing new, and nothing that had not already been said by recent curial and consultative documents. This fact makes the overheated expressions of surprise at DI evident in the Catholic and non-Catholic press a bit puzzling: no-one with a serious interest in the recent history of magisterial thinking about religious diversity could possibly be surprised by what’s in DI. But there is one relatively novel feature of the document that has received little or no comment. I mean the fact that the Symbol of Constantinople, quoted in §1 of DI as a summary of the capita fundamentalia of the faith, is given without the filioque clause. This is, perhaps, a deeply and silently ecumenical feature of DI, directed at our Orthodox brothers and sisters. It is, anyway, a striking feature of a curial document, all the more so for being unsignalled.

Most of the document, though, is self-consciously not novel. It is, instead, concerned to restate orthodoxy in response to what it perceives as some dubious tendencies in contemporary theological thought, especially the tendency to assert too great a similarity between Christianity and non-Christian religions by claiming complementarity. This tendency most often goes with a division of the divine economy by affirming the possibility that God may work in the world otherwise than through the incarnate Logos. A closely related tendency addressed by DI is that of misunderstanding the nature and significance of inter-religious dialogue. I’ll make brief remarks on each of these.

The most fundamental reason given by DI for rejecting complementarity is an ontological one. It is that affirming complementarity would implicitly (and sometimes

explicitly) deny the fullness and completeness of God's revelatory presence in Jesus. It would, that is, make christological orthodoxy impossible. With this point I have no argument: DI is, in my judgment, entirely correct that Christian orthodoxy, which is constitutively trinitarian, requires as a fundamental grammatical principle the claim that God is fully present in Jesus, present in Jesus, therefore, in a unique and unparalleled way. Complementarity at the ontological level is an impossibility within the bounds of Christian faith and discourse. No completion can be required because it is definitional of God's presence in Jesus that it is complete.

But DI seems also at times to slide from this rejection of complementarity at the level of ontology, to a similar rejection at the level of epistemology. Consider the following: "Therefore, the theory of the limited, incomplete, or imperfect character of the revelation of Jesus Christ, which would be complementary to that found in other religions, is contrary to the Church's faith" (§6). Yes, excellent, three cheers: this is simple orthodoxy, a restatement of a fundamental principle of the faith. But then comes a more problematic move: "Such a position would claim to be based on the notion that the truth about God cannot be grasped and manifested in its globality and completeness by any historical religion, neither by Christianity nor by Jesus Christ" (§6). The English here is a bit barbaric and, I think, not an especially good rendering of the Latin, which for "in its globality and completeness" has "in sua universalitate et plenitudine." Plenitude isn't exactly completeness; in fact, it's very much not completeness, since it indicates a horizon to which speech and thought cannot reach, while 'completeness' suggests that speech and thought have already reached and exhaustively delineated that horizon. Plenitude is open; completeness is closed. This translational slippage is indicative of a conceptual slippage. The claim the revelation of God in Christ is complete (which must be said) is not the same as and does not imply the claim the truth about God explicitly known and taught by the Church is complete. Likewise, to say that the subject of the Church's teaching is the complete revelation of God in Christ (which must be said, and is true) is not to say that what the Church teaches is co-extensive with that complete revelation (which, if said, would at the very least anticipate the eschaton a little too eagerly).

Cardinal Ratzinger of course knows these things far better than I; and when thinking about the completeness or otherwise of the explicit teaching of the Church, he says as much. So, at the end of the paragraph of DI here under discussion, we read (in English) that "the Holy Spirit ... will teach this 'entire truth' (John 16:13) to the Apostles and, through them, to the whole Church" (§6). Note the future tense. This future reference is an essential point: the Holy Spirit has not yet taught the Church everything; and, it ought to be added, what the Holy Spirit has taught has not yet been fully comprehended by the Church.

Why is this important? Well, it opens the possibility of affirming the following claim: it may be that the Church needs to study and understand some of what is taught by alien religious traditions in order to come to comprehend more fully the definitive revelation with which she has been entrusted. If this affirmation is possible—and I suggest it in humility, under the mode of possibility and with obsequium religiosum, as a theological possibility in harmony with what DI says—then a kind of complementarity can be claimed, but one without the deleterious consequences properly perceived and rebutted by DI.

In brief summary of this point: ontologically, complementarity is indefensible. Epistemologically, it can be defended. Not to see this is to confuse claims in the order of being with claims in the order of knowing. Does DI make such a confusion? I'm not quite sure, but I suspect so.

A second point, this time on dialogue. Here I want only to restate and defend what DI says, mostly because much excitable criticism has been made of it in responses to the document in the media, by some of the Church's dialogue partners (Christian and otherwise), and even by some of her own who ought to know better. The position of the document on dialogue is simple and, again, entirely in accord with the pattern of thinking of the Church about this matter since Vatican II. It is that dialogue with members of non-Christian religions is essential for the Church, and that in order for it to be engaged in well the Church must adopt an attitude of respectful desire for understanding (§2). This has been said again and again since the promulgation of Nostra Aetate in 1965.

DI does resist the claim that engagement in dialogue requires abandoning the grammar of the faith by jettisoning or modifying central Christian claims about the nature of God. Those who do make this move place what they perceive as the claims of dialogue above the claims of faith, and the document's strong language about the foolishness of this is entirely justified.

Also implicitly resisted is the claim that even if Christians do believe what DI says they believe about the non-negotiable centrality of the incarnate word to the divine economy, they ought nonetheless, in the service of dialogue, to pretend they do not. This would be to practice deceit in the service of courtesy, and quite apart from the moral difficulties involved with such a recommendation, any dialogue based upon a systematic attempt to obscure from the dialogue partner what is actually believed will produce discussions as anodyne and boring as those heard at (for example) the World's Parliament of Religions. The International Theological Commission's 1997 consultative document Christianity and the World Religions, puts this point well, if somewhat abstractly: "[T]he form of the dialogue cannot invalidate the content of one's own faith and ethics" (§101). This means that all dialogue undertaken by Catholic Christians should assume the central truths of the faith, and should advert to them where the particular circumstances of dialogue make it necessary to do so. Doing so makes dialogue all the more interesting and all the more respectful of one's dialogue-partners. I find the best Buddhist dialogue-partners, for example, to be those who are sure of what they believe, equally sure that it is true, and not shy about sharing it and arguing for it. The idea that one needs to check one's truth-claims at the door in order responsibly to engage in dialogue is a confused and pernicious one: DI rebuts it with clarity and dispatch.

In too-brief summary: DI is a powerful and thoughtful restatement of orthodoxy with respect to the necessarily trinitarian shape of the divine economy, and with respect to how Christians ought think about non-Christian religious traditions from the heart of that orthodoxy. The document offers nothing new on these matters, which is no criticism since that was not its purpose. It does offer a necessary corrective to views about these matters that abandon the grammar of the faith; and while I could wish that its critique of complementarity-views had been more sensitive to the distinction between ontological and epistemological claims, it is nonetheless on the whole a document good to think with, a much-needed reminder of how to think theologically about these matters, and of the virtue of having a magisterium to think with.