



Review: Modalizing the Theology of Religions

Reviewed Work(s):

Is There Only One True Religion or Are There Many? by Schubert M. Ogden

The Diversity of Religions: A Christian Perspective by Joseph A. DiNoia

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Modalizing the Theology of Religions*

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The theology of religions has an a priori and an a posteriori part. The former is concerned with what can be said theologically about the facts of religious pluralism without appealing to anything other than theological axioms. The only knowledge about the world's religious communities (other than that which houses the theologian) required for this enterprise is the bare fact that they exist. The latter, by contrast, deals with specific empirically available knowledge about actual religious communities. The majority of Christian theologizing about non-Christian religious communities and their members has to date been a priori, and its conclusions have tended to be phrased in the indicative mood. So we get, crudely, exclusivism ("Christianity is the only true religion"), inclusivism ("the truth of all religions is included in that of Christianity"), and pluralism ("all religions are true"). There are relatively few Christian theologians with the knowledge or interest to undertake an a posteriori theology whose object is some specific non-Christian religious community or communities.

But even if attention is restricted to the kinds of claims typical of an a priori theology of religions, it is a genuine conceptual advance to see that these claims can be *modalized*, by which I mean, following the technical use of this word among logicians, that they can be recast in terms of possibility and necessity. So we might get "it is possible that there is more than one true religion" and the like. Of the two books under review, Schubert Ogden's is centrally concerned with such a recasting, and it is deeply implicated in the other by Joseph DiNoia. Although both do their work largely a priori, each is concerned with its a posteriori implications, and DiNoia in particular takes trouble to suggest what these may be. So the two books taken together offer new possibilities for both the a priori and the a posteriori parts of the theology of religions.

Ogden's work is motivated partly by logical and partly by theological concerns. Logically, he wants to show that the three positions most commonly taken by those concerned with the question of religious pluralism—the question, understood most broadly, of whether there is only one true religion—do not exhaust the options. Two of the three,

* Schubert M. Ogden, *Is There Only One True Religion or Are There Many?* (Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1992), and Joseph A. DiNoia, *The Diversity of Religions: A Christian Perspective* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1992). I am indebted to careful readings of this essay by Franklin I. Gamwell, Philip Devenish, and Charles Hallisey. Several points remain upon which I and they differ.

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exclusivism and inclusivism, are instances of what he calls "religious monism," the view that there is, in the end, just one true religion (pp. 4–5, 81–82). The specifically Christian version of this is that "the event of Jesus Christ" uniquely constitutes the possibility of salvation (p. 31) or that it alone is what makes it possible for a religion to be formally true. The formal norms of Christianity (pp. 38–39) are, according to this position, seen as identical with the formal norms of all true religion. Exclusivism and inclusivism share this view: it is what makes them monistic. They differ only on the question of how these formal norms are made available to humans.

The contrary (though not the contradictory) of monism is pluralism, which in this context means the claim that there are many formally true religions (p. 54) or even, in an extreme version probably held by no one, that all religions are formally true (p. 23). Monism and pluralism do not exhaust the options, Ogden claims, because it is also possible to assert the modal claim that there *could be* many true religions: that this is a possibility but not an established fact known a priori. This is Ogden's logical tertium quid, a position that he sometimes calls "pluralistic inclusivism" (pp. x–xi) and that he judges not yet to have been demarcated with sufficient clarity from the other positions.

So much for the logic. Theologically—or, better, Christian theologically—Ogden argues that the modal claim of pluralistic inclusivism is the proper one for Christian theologians to assert, and this for the following reasons. First, the inclusivistic and exclusivistic forms of monism suffer from insuperable problems from a Christian point of view. Chief among these is that they offend against what Ogden takes to be the material content of Christian self-understanding ("an understanding of ourselves and all others as alike the objects of God's all-embracing love," p. 45) by giving some human persons, for contingent reasons, privileged access to God's love. In so doing, they create an insoluble and peculiarly unpleasant version of the problem of evil. Second, pluralism suffers from equally damaging internal problems: it requires that one can know, a priori and in principle, what can only be known a posteriori and after a lot of hard empirical work: that many (or even all) religions have the same or largely similar material content (pp. 60–61). Further, pluralists are not in fact able to avoid the deployment of norms of religious truth (pp. 72, 77) in distinguishing true religions from false, in spite of the fact that such avoidance is one of the main desiderata the position is intended to meet. Pluralism, therefore, cannot stand. Third, the modalism of pluralistic inclusivism comports well with what, according to Ogden's lights, is a properly constituted Christian theology—one which, inter alia, acknowledges the formal norm of such a theology to be "the earliest accessible stratum of Christian witness" (p. 39) and which employs a representative

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rather than a constitutive christology, ecclesiology, and sacramental theology. Fourth, monism, pluralism, and pluralistic inclusivism really do exhaust the options on this question, and since the first two have weaknesses that should make them unacceptable to Christians, Christians had better assent to the modal claim of pluralistic inclusivism: the claim that it is possible that there are many true religions. *Quod erat demonstrandum*.

The immediately preceding paragraphs contain a schematic and necessarily inelegant summary of a sustained, careful, and elegant argument. Those immediately following contain equally schematic suggestions as to its strengths and weaknesses.

First, Ogden does a great service to all those, Christian and otherwise, concerned with these questions by setting forth with clarity and force a position that until now has been at best an inchoate part of the debate. Logically, Ogden is clearly and importantly correct that, however the locution "true religion" is construed, the claim that there may be many is distinct from the claims that there is only one or that there are many. Clearly showing this has not been done before. Ogden is also correct, so far as I can see, in his view that the modal claim is to be preferred to the pluralist claim on simple logical grounds: the latter cannot fulfill its own avowed goals and tends toward internal incoherence, while the former, mostly because it is much more modest, lacks these drawbacks.

But I have reservations about some other elements of the argument. For example, in his argument against the monistic positions (both inclusivism and exclusivism), Ogden shows only that these are incompatible with a particular construal of the material content of Christian self-understanding, that they are, in his terms, inappropriate for Christians. He does not, in this work, demonstrate that this reading is the only proper or single best one, which is the same as to say that he does not demonstrate that all others are incredible; and he passes very lightly over deeply controverted issues in Christian systematic theology. It is, to say the least, not obvious that a representative rather than a constitutive christology is the single best option for Christians, and it is, to me at least, strikingly implausible to claim that the formal norm of Christian theology must be identical with what we know of the earliest Christian witness, not least because this way of putting it entails that the material content of the formal norm changes. This is an uneasy situation for those Christians who wish to practice their religion without waiting upon the latest deliverances of scholarly specialists in the study of the New Testament. To say that these positions are not argued here is not exactly a criticism, for Ogden has argued them elsewhere,¹ and there is no reason to expect him to do so here again. But it

¹ Principally in *The Point of Christology* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1982) and in *On Theology* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986).

is important to note such matters in order to highlight the difference, in Ogden's work, between the status of the monistic positions, on the one hand, and pluralism, on the other. If Ogden's arguments against pluralism are good (and they are), no one, Christian or otherwise, can consistently be a pluralist; but the same is not true for the monistic positions. The most that Ogden has demonstrated for those is the truth of the conditional that if Ogden's normative reading (both procedural and substantive) of Christian theology is right, then no Christian can adhere to either of the monistic positions. But the truth of this conditional's antecedent depends on substantive theological positions argued elsewhere; and even if the antecedent is true, it remains possible for non-Christians to hold to one of the monistic positions in their thinking about religious pluralism.

I am also dubious as to whether Ogden's definitions of "religion" ("the primary form of culture in terms of which we human beings explicitly ask and answer the existential question of the meaning of ultimate reality for us," p. 5), and of the existential question that religion is supposedly always concerned with (elucidated, for example, in terms of the quest for authentic human existence and the search for meaning, p. 14), are as formal as he needs them to be. A properly formal definition should restrict itself to the bare claim that it is characteristic of religions to claim that there is some (or some set of) problem(s) to which there is some (or some set of) complete solution(s), and that the problem(s) and solution(s) in question are basic to all other phenomena in that all other phenomena can be construed as instances or epiphenomena of these problem(s) and solution(s), but not vice versa. This is much closer to a formal definition than Ogden's and has the concomitant advantage of not assuming that highly ramified substantive concepts such as "human person," "meaning," "authentic existence," and the like must be implicated with religious problems and solutions. It is, after all, the case that there are communities conventionally called "religious" whose problems and solutions are not so implicated. Formal definitions require placeholders, and Ogden's categories do much more than hold places: they are crypto-Christian.

But these criticisms do not seriously blunt the power of Ogden's arguments. Aesthetic and intellectual pleasure of a high order can be derived from reading this book, and its clear vision of the importance of recasting claims about religious pluralism into modal form is an essential prolegomenon to future a posteriori work in the field.

DiNoia's goal is in part similar to Ogden's. He wants to provide, if not a full-blown Christian theology of religions, at least a sketch of the methods by which one ought to be constructed and the constraints to which it should respond. Such a theology ought, first, to be consistent with orthodox Christian doctrine, which in this connection means above all else, according to DiNoia, that it must make it possible for Christians to affirm

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that salvation is always attained only through the grace of Jesus Christ (p. 166). DiNoia, in contrast to Ogden, takes this affirmation to be a central and nonnegotiable part of Christian self-understanding; a Christian theology of religions must therefore be consistent with it. This makes DiNoia a monist in Ogden's terms, and if Ogden's analysis is correct, DiNoia ought as a result of his monism to be either an inclusivist or an exclusivist. And so he is: he adopts a kind of inclusivism, but one that is modified by the second major constraint he places upon a Christian theology of religions. Such a theology should be responsive to and should take seriously the specific doctrinal and axiological commitments of non-Christian religious communities (pp. 42, 53), and this means that it must not, as inclusivists typically do, judge a priori that non-Christian religious communities are really offering to their members some version of what Christianity offers to its own.

DiNoia thus strongly resists the a priori "assimilation" (p. 58, *passim*) of the doctrinal commitments of non-Christians to those of Christians, a move that he finds entirely typical of Christian inclusivists; he resists with equal strength the pluralist tendency to offer "an independent religious proposal" (p. 138) that is identical with the doctrinal commitments of no actual religious community. Both moves make it impossible for a Christian theology of religions to pay serious attention to the doctrinal and axiological commitments that non-Christian religious communities take themselves to have. When Christian inclusivists hear Buddhists talking of Nirvana, DiNoia argues, they typically assume that the talk is really (though inchoately) about God in Christ, and when pluralists hear any religious person offering doctrinal formulations of its basic valuation, what it thinks "ought unconditionally to engage human beings" (p. 135, *passim*), they will typically take such formulations to be really about the transcendent mystery they take to be at the heart of all religions ("Reality," "Mystery," or the like). Both moves have in common the judgment that most religious communities are not really talking about what they take themselves to be talking about; DiNoia would rather that Christian theologians of religions take non-Christian religious communities to be talking about what they apparently think they are talking about and valuing what they think they are valuing. But how is it possible to be a Christian inclusivist and bring this off?

In order to do this, DiNoia affirms two modal claims (most clearly on pp. 75–82). First, it is possible that the religious aims recommended by some non-Christian communities have significant material commonality with those recommended by Christianity. But where this is so, the religious aims of Christianity always supersede or fulfill those of the non-Christian community. This is required by DiNoia's construal of orthodox Christian self-understanding, the first constraint upon a Christian theol-

ogy of religions mentioned above. Second, it is possible that there are religious communities the material content of whose aims has no significant commonality with that of Christianity's aims. Where this is so, Christians should not deny that such communities can bring their members to the goals they recommend; nor, assuming that such goals do not stand in serious contradiction with those advocated by Christianity, should they judge them undesirable or misrepresent them as being imperfectly Christian. Rather, they should explore them in their unique specificity in an attempt to see what part they might play in God's salvific plan, affirming always that God may eschatologically bring the members of such communities to a condition whose material content is identical with that of salvation as understood by Christians. DiNoia offers, that is to say, a prospective or eschatological account of the salvation of others when the material content of the aims of those others is not significantly similar to that of Christianity's aims.² It is here that DiNoia deploys the idea of purgatory to good effect (pp. 104–7). Whether there are communities with the properties described in either modal claim is a matter for empirical investigation (though DiNoia clearly thinks there are instances of both). In either case, though more especially in the latter, DiNoia's goal is to make it possible for Christians to pay serious attention to the doctrinal specificities of non-Christian communities, and to do so within an intellectual framework that accords with their own self-understanding.

There are difficulties with DiNoia's introduction of the idea of purgatory at this point in the argument. This is not an idea that now commands very wide acceptance among Christians. Protestants have almost always been dubious about it, it lacks biblical warrant, and it is probably right to say that even Roman Catholics have cherished the idea only since the twelfth century (and perhaps even they cherish it less since Vatican II?).³ So it scarcely has the theological weight of DiNoia's other conceptual tools. That some such move is needed shows that, in this limited sense at least, DiNoia has not escaped the conceptual tensions inherent in what Ogden calls religious monism. Affirmation of God's universal salvific will, together with affirmation of the second of DiNoia's modal claims, requires some ad hoc view of this kind, though its prima facie implausibility could be tempered by modalizing it too ("it is possible that God uses purgatory to bring about the salvation of the members of religious communities the material content of whose aims has no significant overlap with that of

² In doing this DiNoia is influenced especially by George Lindbeck's work, especially "Fides ex auditu and the Salvation of Non-Christians," in *The Gospel and the Ambiguity of the Church*, ed. Vilmos Vajta (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1973), and *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984).

³ I am indebted here to conversations with Joseph Wawrykow.

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Christianity's aims," or the like). But DiNoia does not clearly or consistently phrase his claims about purgatory in this way.

It is interesting to note that DiNoia and Ogden are in broad agreement, especially as to the importance of phrasing claims about non-Christian religious communities modally (although DiNoia is rather less self-conscious about this than Ogden).⁴ Where they differ is not on the logical issue; the fact that they both use modal forms (see esp. DiNoia, p. 69) shows that they both clearly see the limits of what can be done with this question by a priori reasoning, and I see nothing in Ogden's logical approach that would prove unacceptable to DiNoia. Their differences come rather from a strictly theological source: DiNoia's construal of proper Christian self-understanding requires a constitutive christology, while Ogden's rules it out. Hence DiNoia's monism and Ogden's pluralistic inclusivism. But DiNoia's second modal claim—as to the possibility of there being religious communities the material content of whose aims has no significant commonality with that of Christianity's aims—should be entirely acceptable to Ogden (as is suggested by his remarks on Buddhism, pp. 62–67), though it is not clearly stated by him.

There is much more in DiNoia's work. In addition to the formal proposals I have analyzed, he also provides a discussion of the history of Christian doctrines about non-Christian religious communities and their members (pp. 4–33), the beginnings of a Christian theological account of the providential purposes (for Christians) of there being non-Christian religious communities (pp. 65–97), and an outline of the advantages for Christian theology of the context for it provided by serious dialogue with committed members of non-Christian religious communities (pp. 109–54). This last deserves some further comment, for it is in this context that DiNoia develops his proposals for a "broadly realist construal" (p. 152) of religious referential arguments and predications. DiNoia claims, correctly, that such a construal of religious discourse in both its referential mode (when it attempts to establish what it is about, for example, "God" or "Nirvana") and its predicative mode (when it attempts to establish what properties its object has, as, for example, when it says that "God is love" or "Nirvana is deathless") is required for an accurate descriptive identification of religious discourse as such. Put differently, any account of religious

⁴ And he occasionally slips as a result of this lack of self-consciousness, as on p. 166, where he claims that he wants to "override" the modal claim that it is possible for members of non-Christian religious communities to attain salvation (as Christians understand it) in virtue of their membership in such communities and to replace it with the prospective or eschatological account of salvation already mentioned. But to be consistent, he ought to *affirm* this modal claim, as well as the modal claim that it is possible for members of non-Christian religious communities to attain salvation (as Christians understand it) prospectively, as a result of hearing the word in purgatory or the like.

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discourse that systematically excludes the possibility of a realist construal of its attempts at reference and predication misidentifies the logical space within which such discourse takes itself to function. The advantage of the dialogue situation as DiNoia sees it is that this logical space and this broadly realist construal are likely to be substantially agreed on by all serious participants. Serious constructive conversation can then occur without having to argue that issue.

Finally: these books are important chiefly because they see certain logical issues involved with the theology of religions clearly and present them in such a way as to make genuinely new work in the field possible. By modalizing the a priori part of the theology of religions, they show both the limits of what can be done a priori and the benefits of doing it with clarity; by exhibiting the deep-going theological disagreements I have pointed to, they demonstrate that the theology of religions is part of theology proper and that any attempt to undertake the former is implicated with substantive decisions about the material content of the latter. Realizing both these things is rare among practitioners of the discipline. I hope, for that reason at least, that both books will be widely read and discussed.