



Gavin D'Costa's Trinitarian Theology of Religions: An Assessment

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Abstract

Gavin D'Costa's writings represent a significant attempt in the current discussion of the theology of religions to utilize the resources of Trinitarian doctrine and address the function of religions in the divine salvific plan. This paper systematically outlines his theology through an interpretive model of particularity/universality to elucidate its structure and highlight his emphases on Christology, Pneumatology and Ecclesiology. I argue that while his system has the considerable merit of a desire to maintain a single economy, there remain several difficulties, including a possible conflation of salvific will and grace, and a dissonance of the proposal of limbo with his system.

Keywords

Gavin D'Costa, Theology of Religions, Trinitarian Theology, Catholicism, Post-Vatican II Theology

Introduction

As a key pacesetter in the current discussion of the theology of religions, Gavin D'Costa's writings constitute an important attempt over the past three decades to utilize the resources of the doctrine of the Trinity to address the theological significance of religious traditions in the salvific plan of God. The aim of this paper is to examine his theology through a systematic exposition of his writings followed by a critical analysis of some underlying assumptions and implications. Born in Kenya, East Africa, of Indian descent, D'Costa migrated to England in his youth and completed a first degree in English and Theology at Birmingham University, and a Ph.D in Divinity from the University of Cambridge.¹ Currently Professor in Catholic theology at

¹ For a brief autobiographical profile, see G. D'Costa, P. Knitter, and D. Strange, *Only One Way? Three Christian Responses to the Uniqueness of Christ in a Pluralistic*

Bristol University, his primary theological concerns are post-Vatican II Catholicism and the theology of inter-religious dialogue.² Previous interpreters of D'Costa have attempted to analyze his theology as a proposal to relate dialectically “otherness” and the “closure of truth”.³ While this approach has the advantage of focusing attention on the Other, I will argue that D'Costa's respect for the Other is predicated on a Trinitarian understanding, and therefore a particular-universality lattice as proposed in this paper lends itself more readily to an analysis of the structure of his system.⁴

A. Trinitarian Theology of Religions

The development of D'Costa's theology stemmed from an assumption that Trinitarian doctrine contains adequate resources for holding together in fruitful tension the two main theses of a theology of religions, i.e. the universal salvific will of God, and the particularity

World (London: SCM Press, 2011), pp. 6–7. Also, G. D'Costa, *Christianity and World Religions: Disputed Questions in the Theology of Religions* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), p. 6–7. Subsequently *CWR*. His Bristol University faculty webpage, <http://www.bristol.ac.uk/thrs/staff/gdc.html> (accessed 1 Jan 2012), contains a comprehensive list of his significant published works, only omitting some recent articles. See *Ibid.*, “The Trinity and Other Religions: Genesis 18, Judaism and Hinduism in Two Works of Art,” *Gregorianum* 80 (1999); *Ibid.*, “Hermeneutics and the Second Vatican Council's Teachings,” *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 20 (2009); *Ibid.*, “The Holy Spirit and the World Religions,” *Louvain Studies* 34 (2009–2010). I am particularly grateful to Prof. D'Costa for drawing my attention to the last paper.

² Besides *CWR*, his main theological works are, G. D'Costa, *Theology and Religious Pluralism: The Challenge of Other Religions* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986); *Ibid.*, *The Meeting of Religions and the Trinity* (Edinburgh: T.&T. Clark, 2000); *Ibid.*, *John Hick's Theology of Religions: A Critical Evaluation* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1987). First and second books subsequently *TRP* and *Meeting* respectively. Other edited books are *Ibid.*, ed. *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered: The Myth of a Pluralistic Theology of Religions* (Maryknoll, NY: 1990); *Ibid.*, ed. *Resurrection Reconsidered* (Oxford: Oneworld, 1996). First book subsequently *CURec*. Since 2010, three additional books have been published, *Ibid.*, ed. *The Catholic Church and the World Religions: A Theological and Phenomenological Account* (London: T.&T. Clark, 2011); D'Costa, Knitter, and Strange, *Only One Way*; K. J. Becker, I. Morali, M. Borrmans, and G. D'Costa, eds., *Catholic Engagement with World Religions* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2010). These do not, however, represent a major modification of the Trinitarian proposal contained in his earlier writings.

³ P. Plata, “The Appeal to the Trinity in Contemporary Theology of Interreligious Dialogue” (Ph. D thesis, Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, 2007); *Ibid.*, “Gavin D'Costa's Trinitarian Theology of Religions,” *Louvain Studies* 30 (2005).

⁴ Hodgson describes D'Costa's theology as an inclusive “christocentric trinitarianism” that allows for pneumatic activity in the religions but circumscribed by Christ. P. C. Hodgson, “The Spirit and Religious Pluralism,” *Horizons* 31 (2004), p. 26. Also, P. Valkenberg, *Sharing Lights on the Way to God: Muslim-Christian Dialogue and Theology in the Context of Abrahamic Partnership* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2006), p. 179.

of Christ for salvation.⁵ In this section, I will delineate his theology through the twin axes of particularity and universality by analyzing his Trinitarian Christology, Pneumatology and Ecclesiology. In his paper, "Towards a Trinitarian Theology of Religions", he had outlined two preliminary theses, (1) that a Trinitarian Christocentrism "guards against exclusivism and pluralism by dialectically relating the universal to the particular", and, (2) that the Spirit "allows the particularity of Christ to be related to the universal activity of God in human history".⁶ Although his books, *Meeting* and *CWR*, did not employ these categories, I will argue it can be interpreted through this dialectical matrix which allows us to perceive features in his system not highlighted previously. In the second section, I will then attempt an evaluation of its intra-systematic coherency.

I. Trinitarian Christology (Particularity)

a. *Jesus Christ as the Normative Revelation of God*

D'Costa's Trinitarian Christology begins with the assertion that the doctrine of the Trinity safeguards "against an *exclusive* identification of God and Jesus as well as a *non-normative* identification of God and Jesus." (emphasis original)⁷ This dual negation follows Lindbeck who had noted Athanasius' understanding of the *homoousion* implies "that whatever is said of the Father is said of the Son, except that the Son is not the Father".⁸ On the one hand, this affirmation contends with an exclusivist strain of Christomonism which presupposes the Father is exclusively known through the Son by maintaining he is also disclosed through the Spirit. On the other hand, against pluralist theocentrism, the axiom affirms, "whatever is said of the Father is said of the Son", which asserts Jesus as the revelation of God.⁹ The

⁵ Two significant earlier papers are, G. D'Costa, "Christ, the Trinity and Religious Plurality," in *CURec*, ed. G. D'Costa (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1990); *Ibid.*, "Towards a Trinitarian Theology of Religions," in *A Universal Faith?*, eds. C. Cornille and V. Neckebrouck (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 1991). In this first mention of the doctrine as a potential resource, D'Costa writes that, "(a)t the heart of a Trinitarian doctrine of God, the multiplicity of religions takes on a special theological significance that cannot be ignored by Christians who worship a Trinitarian God". D'Costa, "Christ, the Trinity," p. 16. The developed formulation is then expounded in his books, *Meeting* and *CWR*.

⁶ D'Costa, "Towards," pp. 147–53. Ipgrave has noted the influence of D'Costa's theology on the 1995 Church of England's Doctrine Commission document entitled, "The Mystery of Salvation". M. Ipgrave, *Trinity and Inter Faith Dialogue: Plenitude and Plurality*, Religions and Discourse. Vol. 14 (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2003), pp. 18 n. 3, 53–4.

⁷ D'Costa, "Towards," p. 148.

⁸ G. A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1984), p. 94.

⁹ D'Costa, "Towards," p. 148.

theologically appropriate way to refer to Jesus, therefore, is as “*totus Deus*, never *totum Dei*; wholly God, but never the whole of God.”¹⁰ Because of the indissoluble connection between Jesus of Nazareth and divine revelation, there could not be any new revelation of God in the other religious traditions, and any talk of a plurality of revelations has to be rejected.

However, any description of Christ as the *unique* revelation of God is eschewed, in favour of the term *normative*, which emphasizes knowledge of God cannot contradict this knowledge through Christ.¹¹ In determining the presence of God in other religions, the normative Jesus then adjudicates the criteriological issue because he is the *norma normans non normata*, i.e. the norm by which God's presence in other religions is to be measured, but which in himself is not measured.¹² This normativity of Jesus is non-static because our understanding of him is “constantly transformed and enriched through the guiding/declaring/judging function of the Spirit,” resulting in a dialectical tension that remains until the eschaton.¹³ Insofar as no new revelation is possible since God has been revealed in Jesus, revelation is closed, and yet it is also open as the Spirit continually transforms our understanding of who God is, and within this dialectical relation between the Spirit and Jesus Christ therefore lies the theological space in which Christians must remain open to the world religions.¹⁴

¹⁰ Ibid., “Christ, the Trinity,” p. 18. Knitter notes Hick makes the same assertion, but further suggests other religious figures could also be *totus Deus*. P. F. Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2002), pp. 122–3. Thoppil also observes D'Costa's use of this expression was distinguished from pluralist proponents. J. Thoppil, “Christology, Liberation and Religious Pluralism. A Critical Study of M.M. Thomas, P.F. Knitter and G. D'Costa” (Excerpt of Ph. D Thesis, Pontificia Università Gregoriana, Rome, 1998), p. 42.

¹¹ The universal applicability of the term “uniqueness” bankrupts its very meaning, i.e. every event and person is unique. D'Costa, “Towards,” p. 149.

¹² Ibid., *Meeting*, p. 36. In contrast, Knitter regards Christ as “*norma Normans et normata*”, the norm that norms all others and is itself normed. P. F. Knitter, *Jesus and the Other Names* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1996), p. 169 n. 9.

¹³ G. D'Costa, “A Christian Reflection on Some Problems with Discerning ‘God’ in the World Religions,” *Dialogue and Alliance* 5 (1991), p. 13. Finger cites D'Costa's work as support for his view that Jesus is not the sole content of revelation but its norm. T. Finger, “A Mennonite Theology for Interfaith Relations,” in *Grounds for Understanding*, ed. S. M. Heim (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 1998), p. 91 n. 83.

¹⁴ D'Costa, “Towards,” p. 152. For this reason, D'Costa contends against Ward's suggestion that “revelation” could be found within other religions. G. D'Costa, “Christ, Revelation and the World Religions: A Critical Appreciation of Keith Ward's Comparative Global Theology,” in *Comparative Theology*, ed. T. W. Bartel (London: SPCK, 2003), p. 37.

b. The Particular Jesus and the Particularity of Religions

The historic particularity of Jesus as understood within Trinitarian Christology leads to the correlative recognition that other religions should be seen as equally distinct and *particular*. In contrast to pluralism which mythologizes away all particularities, the Incarnation attests to God's previous act in history, and is a demonstration that he takes specificities seriously.¹⁵ Therefore, due recognition needs to be accorded the narratives of other faiths,¹⁶ and he notes approvingly the efforts of comparative theologians in not subsuming them under an abstract category.¹⁷ As a defense of their nature, D'Costa suggests one cannot prejudge religions as human structures of self-justification, and it is this concern that motivated him to seek an engagement with them without smothering the Other through rejection or assimilation.¹⁸

At the same time as the particularity of all religions is affirmed, D'Costa does not fall into the trap of advocating their absolute incommensurability. This nuanced approach to the nature of religions is seen in his critique of Ward and Netland's separate attempts to devise a set of neutral criteria for judging religions. He contends that since the different religious traditions are incommensurable with one another, these endeavors are problematic and ultimately fruitless.¹⁹ However, total incommensurability is also self-defeating since this effectively isolates all religions such that no engagement is possible.²⁰ The resolution of this *impasse* is found in a critical awareness

¹⁵ D'Costa, "Christ, the Trinity," p. 17. Hick's mythological interpretation of the Incarnation was cited as a prime example of this failure. G. D'Costa, "Christian Theology and Other Religions: An Evaluation of John Hick and Paul Knitter," *Studia Missionalia* 42 (1993), p. 163.

¹⁶ NA was seen as a prime example of Christianity recognizing the need to relate to the religions differently, with Judaism first, then Islam, followed by Hinduism, Buddhism and other traditional religions. D'Costa, *Meeting*, pp. 102–3. In contrast, Kaufman pushes historicity to its limit by arguing that Christianity should recognize itself as the product of human responses to particular historical situations, but Newbigin has questioned his assumption of the superiority of historical consciousness to other culturally conditioned epistemic avenues. G. D. Kaufman, "Religious Diversity, Historical Consciousness, and Christian Theology," in *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness*, eds. J. Hick and P. F. Knitter (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1987), p. 12; L. Newbigin, "Religious Pluralism and the Uniqueness of Jesus Christ," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 13 (1989), p. 50.

¹⁷ In doing so, he observes that comparativists have been able to be more sensitive to historical intra-religious diversities. D'Costa, *CWR*, p. 40.

¹⁸ G. D'Costa, "The Christian Trinity: Paradigm for Pluralism?," in *Pluralism and the Religions*, ed. J. D. A. May (London: Cassell, 1998), p. 33.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, "Whose Objectivity? Whose Neutrality? The Doomed Quest for a Neutral Vantage Point from Which to Judge Religions," *Religious Studies* 29 (1993), p. 79.

²⁰ D'Costa, "Whose Objectivity?," p. 80. This is in contrast to Panikkar's contention that "the incommensurability of ultimate systems is unbridgeable" because "(n)othing can

of the inescapability of the tradition-specificity of one's own views, rather than a misguided effort to seek a foundational Archimedean "objective" point.²¹ Therefore, his proposal for a *Catholic* Trinitarian theology of religions can be read as an unapologetic attempt based on the premise his specific formulation could have applicability not only for his theological constituency, but non-Catholics and even non-Christians.²² The particularity pole found within Christology leads to full acknowledgment of the auto-particularity of his position, as well as concrete engagement with the religions in their distinctive existences as specific social-religious realities.

II. Trinitarian Pneumatology (Universality)

a. The Universal Spirit as Presence of God in Other Religions

Coordinate to Trinitarian Christology, D'Costa puts forth the thesis that it is Trinitarian Pneumatology that allows particularity to be related to universality. While Christ is the final cause of salvation, the Spirit relates this salvific activity universally and potentially admits other religions to participate in his salvation. Following the trajectory of Conciliar and post-Conciliar developments, he notes *GS 22* has maintained the possibility of the association of the paschal mystery universally through the Spirit, and this possible presence of the Spirit elevates them into the role of potential dialogue-partners for Christianity.²³

The possible presence of the Spirit in the religions then necessitates a thorough re-evaluation of their theological status. D'Costa references the Conciliar documents to suggest that religions should be seen as an acknowledgement of a universal human quest for answers to the deepest questions of life and not simply the product of a general anthropological sinful condition.²⁴ On the one hand, while he does not deny that sin and error could be found within them, he does recognize the Spirit's work as the source of all such questing.²⁵ On the other hand, he argues the Conciliar documents are silent

encompass reality". R. Panikkar, "The Jordon, the Tiber, and the Ganges," in *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness*, eds. J. Hick and P. F. Knitter (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1987), p. 110.

²¹ D'Costa, "Whose Objectivity?," p. 90.

²² As he puts it, his is an attempt "to establish a Roman Catholic trinitarian orientation in relation to other religions" and he welcomes even non-Christians to engage critically with his proposal. *Ibid.*, *Meeting*, pp. 99, 138.

²³ G. D'Costa, "*Nostra Aetate* – Telling God's Story in Asia: Promises and Pitfalls," in *Vatican II and Its Legacy*, eds. M. Lamberigts and L. Kenis (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2002), p. 336.

²⁴ D'Costa, *Meeting*, p. 108.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, "NA," p. 336.

regarding religions as independent means to salvation, attributing this to the presence of error within them.²⁶ The silence of the documents could only be read as affirmative by those who posit an extremely close relationship between grace and nature,²⁷ as it was actually a deliberate statement against pluralism and inclusivism without denying that religions contain much good.²⁸ His position may be read as a delicate attempt to provide a theological rationale of religions as having a “possible providential purpose” (emphasis added)²⁹ without full affirmation or disapproval as he walks the tightrope of justifying *de facto* pluralism but not falling into the trap of affirming *de jure* pluralism which *DI* has explicitly condemned.³⁰

The Spirit's presence also implies one may discern in the religions the inchoate reality of the kingdom outside of the historical Church.³¹ A strict identification of the kingdom with the Church is rejected in favor of an integral connection since the historical Church is not yet the Church in its eschatological fullness as *GS 44* has acknowledged.³² Concretely, the “fruits of the Spirit” may be discovered, among which the greatest is “love”, which is evidence of the highest of ethical living.³³ In that sense, the Spirit could be described as

²⁶ *Ibid.*, *Meeting*, p. 105.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, *Meeting*, p. 102. He notes that the debate between Balthasar and Rahner on the “anonymous Christian” could be seen as resolved by the Conciliar documents that suggest, “the Balthasar side of the debate should be favoured”. *Ibid.*, “NA,” pp. 349–50.

²⁸ D'Costa, *Meeting*, p. 109.

²⁹ G. D'Costa, “Revelation and Revelations: Discerning God in Other Religions. Beyond a Static Valuation,” *Modern Theology* 10 (1994), p. 177. In contrast, Dupuis was less hesitant that religions have a definite role. He writes, “(E)ven after the Lord's historical coming: their [religions] providential role endured until such time as individual persons would be directly challenged by the Christian message”. J. Dupuis, *Christianity and the Religions*, trans., P. Berryman (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2002), p. 155.

³⁰ D'Costa's considers *DI* as putting forth a “very nuanced position that refuses to either condemn religions as such, or accept them, as such”. G. D'Costa, “Christian Orthodoxy and Religious Pluralism: A Response to Terrence Tilley,” *Modern Theology* 23 (2007), p. 441. In fact, D'Costa's work, *Meeting*, has been regarded as espousing a position so allied to *DI* that D'Arcy suggests it was its *apologia*. J. D. A. May, “Catholic Fundamentalism? Some Implications of *Dominus Iesus* for Dialogue and Peacemaking,” *Horizons* 28 (2001), pp. 280–1. Kärkkäinen describes *Meeting* as the “theological ratification of the mainline Catholic standpoint”. V.-M. Kärkkäinen, *An Introduction to the Theology of Religions: Biblical, Historical, and Contemporary Perspectives* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2003), p. 216.

³¹ D'Costa, *Meeting*, p. 114.

³² *Ibid.*, *Meeting*, p. 112.

³³ *Ibid.*, “Revelation and Revelations,” pp. 173–4. Here, D'Costa seems to employ the phrase “fruits of the Spirit” in a slightly indiscriminate manner compared to the biblical usage in Gal 5:22–23 which refers to the singular term “fruit” with nine attributes (including love) but without privileging any single one. It is in 1 Cor 13:13 that love was termed the “greatest of these” in comparison to faith and hope, and by calling love the greatest of all “fruits”, he effectively collapses these two ideas. This confusion is again apparent in the same paper when he then referred to love as “greatest gift of the Spirit” (emphasis

inchoately forming children of God, though he qualifies this should not be taken as affirming pluralism or inclusivism.³⁴

b. The Spirit's "Invitation to Relational Engagement"

The elevation of the status of religions leads to the feasibility of "relational engagement" with them, which is his preferred term for inter-religious interaction.³⁵ Here, he departs from Milbank who employs "out-narration" or MacIntyre who considers the Other as a "rival" as he regards the Other as genuinely interesting in her difference.³⁶ Within this process of understanding Self and Other, a distinction is made between engaging with the auto-interpretation and a legitimate hetero-interpretation of a religion.³⁷ To mitigate the dangers of domesticating the Other, auto-interpretation is given epistemic priority such that hetero-interpretation is always based *first* on it in a process similar to picking up a second language before engaging with another culture.³⁸

The necessity of such engagements can be seen in the call to bring the "gifts of the Spirit" found within the religions into the fold of the Church. In an earlier essay, D'Costa first raised the possibility that the religions themselves may contain resources "to cultivate and promote what St. Paul called the gifts of the Spirit".³⁹ The

added), since it was clear in its context he was referring not to the types of charismatic gifts granted by the Spirit as described in 1 Cor 12:8–13 but good works based on a human response to divine grace.

³⁴ Ibid., *Meeting*, p. 116.

³⁵ Ibid., *Meeting*, p. 108. Various terms have been employed by D'Costa to describe this inter-religious encounter. In his first book, he argues, "the inclusivist position does justice to the different aspects involved in *dialogue*" (emphasis added). Ibid., *TRP*, p. 94. Later, he leaned towards the phrase "negotiation with the 'Other'" as he agreed with Ward's observation that the term "dialogue" neglects "the problematic socio-political contexts of 'exchange'". Ibid., "The Christian Trinity," pp. 34, n. 3. However, he did not provide specific reasons for later adopting the phrase "relational engagement", though it could be suggestive of a move away from a hermeneutics of suspicion of intentionality (both one's own and the other) that negotiation entailed. Ibid., "Trinity and Other Religions," p. 5.

³⁶ D'Costa, *Meeting*, p. 9. D'Costa has termed his proposal in *The Trinity and the Meeting of Religions* (*sic*) a broadening of MacIntyre's project to engage with not just modernity and postmodernity but also the world religions, i.e. a "neo-MacIntyre postmodern model" for the religions. G. D'Costa, "Postmodernity and Religious Plurality: Is a Common Global Ethic Possible or Desirable?," in *The Blackwell Companion to Postmodern Theology*, ed. G. Ward (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), pp. 140–1; Ibid., "Response to Ian Markham," *Conversations in Religion and Theology* 4 (2006), p. 161.

³⁷ D'Costa, *Meeting*, p. 100. Ipgrave employs a similar distinction in a proposal for Christian-Muslim dialogue. M. Ipgrave, "Anglican Approaches to Christian-Muslim Dialogue," *Journal of Anglican Studies* 3 (2005), p. 233.

³⁸ D'Costa, *Meeting*, p. 115.

³⁹ Ibid., "Christ, the Trinity," p. 22.

ecclesiological dimension of the encounter with the religions has been underlined such that the Church has the dual function and responsibility of firstly, discovering the gifts that the Spirit has embedded within other religious structures, and secondly, integrating them into herself inasmuch as these are meant for her holiness through the act of relational engagement.⁴⁰ Since these gifts bear the same spiritual patrimony as those that the Spirit has already endowed within the Church through Christ, they will be continuous, though not repetitive with, existing ones, although he adds the caveat that their specificity can only be determined by particular historical encounters. In summary, his conception of the gifts of the Spirit found in other religions may be interpreted as the Pneumatological analogue of fulfillment theory; that the elements of truth and holiness are the results of the “seeds of the Word”, the difference here being that the Spirit does not directly “fulfill” the gifts he had bestowed in the same sense that Christ does to the “seeds”, although one could argue the process of bringing them in for the Church’s edification is a type of fulfilment for them.

III. Trinitarian Ecclesiology (Dialectic Between Particularity/Universality)

a. The Ecclesial Discernment of “Christ-likeness” in the Other

In our discussion on Pneumatology, I have observed D’Costa has suggested the Spirit was “‘inchoately’ forming children of God celebrating God’s kingdom”.⁴¹ This precipitates an inference of the possibility of “Christ-like” behavior to be found in the adherents of other faiths, and supported by an analogy between the intra- and extra-ecclesial work of the Spirit. Theologically, this may be interpreted as a culmination of the intersection of the Spirit’s universal activity in the Other with the work of the Particular Christ to engender Christ-likeness, or equally read as the work of the universal Christ in the Other through the agency of his Spirit. Such a calibrated view of the imitation of Christ opens the door for Christians to perceive new forms of practices the Spirit may be generating, including recognizing the likeness of Jesus in others, while guarding against an uncritical assumption that every new practice is prompted by the Spirit which would effectively conflate him and the world.⁴²

⁴⁰ In this context, D’Costa specifically cautions against any non-ecclesial application towards this dual operation by “particular theologians” or “talented individuals”. *Ibid.*, *Meeting*, p. 115.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, *Meeting*, p. 116.

⁴² *Ibid.*, *Meeting*, p. 131.

Although such Christ-likeness may be found among other religious followers, to the extent that they could colloquially be called “saints”, D’Costa registers an extreme reluctance about calling them so given the technical usage of the term within the Catholic Church.⁴³ In a discussion of Stuart’s proposal to canonize non-Catholics, he argues against it by noting that canonization is an intra-ecclesial act that marks one as conforming to the Christian faith, and the canonizing of a non-Catholic could only be the result of a disregard of the religious self-understanding of the Other.⁴⁴ Also, the Catholic view of sainthood includes the cult of veneration and communion with the saint and there could be difficulties in identifying the exact miracles that the non-Christian saint is supposed to have performed. While he is in sympathy with a trans-religious understanding of the concept of holiness, he argues that the most one could say was that a “saint-type” has been found in other religious traditions.⁴⁵ As concrete examples, he compares the lives of Roop Kanwar, a Hindu *devi* (female goddess), and Edith Stein, a Catholic saint, and notes similarities between them in that both sought to accrue transference merit for others. While Stein saw her death as atoning for the sins of the Church, and the German and Jewish peoples, Kanwar viewed her *sati* (voluntary self-immolation) as merit accrued by her and transferrable to her husband to release him from hell.⁴⁶ Though D’Costa finds *sati* profoundly abhorrent, nevertheless he reasons this could be interpreted intra-systematically as a legitimate attempt by a woman to transcend a deeply patriarchal tradition in choosing to be a saviour even at the expense of her own death.⁴⁷ Thus, despite an unwillingness to describe a non-Catholic as a saint, he acknowledges the possibility of an analogical similarity with Stein’s example such that some elements of holiness may be found in the practices of Hinduism.⁴⁸

The task of discerning Christ-like behavior then falls upon the Church, for “(t)he Spirit in the church allows for the possible (and extremely complex and difficult) discernment of Christ-like practice in the Other”.⁴⁹ Such conduct may be either generated in line with the religious self-understanding of non-Christians, or emerged through resistance to their traditions, since the work of the Spirit cannot

⁴³ Ibid., *Meeting*, p. 130.

⁴⁴ G. D’Costa, “The Communion of Saints and Other Religions: On Sainly Wives in Hinduism and Catholicism,” in *Holiness Past and Present*, ed. S. C. Barton (Edinburgh: T.&T. Clark, 2003), pp. 421–2.

⁴⁵ D’Costa, “Communion,” p. 423.

⁴⁶ Ibid., “Communion,” pp. 430–1.

⁴⁷ Ibid., “Communion,” p. 426.

⁴⁸ Ibid., “Communion,” p. 440.

⁴⁹ Ibid., *Meeting*, p. 129.

be stymied or thwarted.⁵⁰ The possibility exists, however that the Church may completely fail to recognize such behavior when it has been manifested before her, or even persecute its practitioners, as in the case of Joan of Arc. These difficulties should not obviate the need for the Church's continuing discernment of such behavior, but rather serve as a warning against any form of triumphalism, and remind her of the constant need for the Spirit's guidance.⁵¹

b. The Fate of the Unevangelized – Limbo of the Just

Within his Trinitarian framework, D'Costa maintains the view that the religious traditions of others are not to be regarded as salvific vehicles while holding to the availability of saving grace for the invincibly ignorant non-Christian. This raises the question of how ultimately is a non-Christian to be saved, and as a possible resolution, he suggests the potential of a post-mortem solution, marking a shift from a previous antipathy towards it.⁵² Here, we reached his most novel proposal yet, as he argues that an analogical utilization of the patristic concept of the "limbo of the just" could fruitfully address the question of the fate of the religious Other.⁵³ Given the tradition that Christ's descent was to preach the gospel to those who had died before the Incarnation, i.e. to the limbo of the just, a case could be made that in an analogical sense, those non-Christians could qualify to be in this limbo as an intermediary stage before attaining the beatific vision.⁵⁴

At the same time, D'Costa rejects the possibility of a purgatorial step for a non-culpable non-Christian. He counters DiNoia's proposal that the non-Christians could be in purgatory by arguing that it is a state of purification solely for Christians who are already justified and

⁵⁰ Ibid., *Meeting*, p. 115.

⁵¹ Ibid., *Meeting*, pp. 129–30.

⁵² His earlier position was that it was another "implausible 'epicycle'". Ibid., *TRP*, p. 68. Thus, Lindbeck's proposal was critiqued for diminishing the historical-social nature of persons. G. D'Costa, "The Absolute and Relative Nature of the Gospel: Christianity and Other Religions," in *Pluralism, Tolerance and Dialogue*, ed. M. D. Bryant (University of Waterloo Press, 1989), pp. 142–3; Lindbeck, *Nature*, p. 59. Contrast this with his later view that he found Lindbeck's suggestion of a post-mortem encounter with Christ "deeply attractive" and implied in his own tradition. D'Costa, *CWR*, pp. 30–1, 162.

⁵³ There are four possible post-mortem aspects in Catholic tradition other than the beatific vision: (1) hell, as a place of damnation, (2) *limbus puerorum* (limbo of unbaptized infants/children's limbo), (3) the limbo of the just/Fathers, and (4) *purgatorium* (purgatory). G. D'Costa, "The Descent into Hell as a Solution for the Problem of the Fate of Unevangelized Non-Christians: Balthasar's Hell, the Limbo of the Fathers and Purgatory," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 11 (2009), p. 148.

⁵⁴ D'Costa, "Descent," p. 156.

destined for heaven but still encumbered by sin.⁵⁵ Another proposal, Christ's "descent into hell" on Holy Saturday put forth by Balthasar, was similarly discounted.⁵⁶ Any suggestion that all non-Christians are damned to hell only to be saved by Christ ignores the Catholic position that salvific elements of grace may be found outside the Church as well as the view that religions are to be regarded as *praeparatio evangelica*.⁵⁷ Ultimately, while Balthasar's approach is innovative and not to be rejected because it is so, D'Costa argues that it is problematic on Christological and Trinitarian grounds.⁵⁸

Further, D'Costa argues that his proposal of limbo has the additional merit of not requiring a post-mortem *conversion*.⁵⁹ Thus, it does not abrogate the historical decisions made by individuals as they participate in the building of God's kingdom in inchoate ways when they seek truth and holiness, nor does it contradict the traditional teaching of an ultimate binary fate for all. Instead of "conversion", the process is more akin to one of coming to maturation, or even possibly the immediate enjoyment of the beatific vision.⁶⁰ As for the role of the Church in this process, he draws upon Sullivan's suggestion that her prayers and penance for the salvation of the world are instrumental in the salvation of all.⁶¹

B. Assessment

The above discussion has presented an explication of D'Costa's Trinitarian theology of religions based on a universality-particularity structure, and has revealed it to be both nuanced in conception and

⁵⁵ G. D'Costa, "Review: *The Diversity of Religions*. By J. A. Dinoia," *The Thomist* 57 (1993), p. 528. Purgatory, by Trent's understanding, is "a state, where souls are purified between death and resurrection" and applicable only to those died in a state of grace but with imperfectly expiated mortal sin or unconfessed venial sins. J. Casey, *After Lives: A Guide to Heaven, Hell, and Purgatory* (Oxford: OUP, 2009), p. 226.

⁵⁶ E. T. Oakes, "The Internal Logic of Holy Saturday in the Theology of Hans Urs Von Balthasar," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 9 (2007), p. 188. He also argues that Balthasar's theology could be seen as fulfilling Newman's criteria for authentic doctrinal development within the Catholic Church. Oakes, "Internal Logic," pp. 195–9. This was disputed by Pitstick who applied Newman's seven "notes" described in his 1878 *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* (accessible on <http://www.newmanreader.org/works/development/index.html>, 7 Jan 2011), and contended it represented a corruption instead. A. Pitstick, "Development of Doctrine, or Denial? Balthasar's Holy Saturday and Newman's *Essay*," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 11 (2009).

⁵⁷ D'Costa, "Descent," p. 151.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, "Descent," pp. 153–4.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, "Descent," p. 166.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, "Descent," p. 163.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, "Descent," pp. 163–4; *Ibid.*, *CWR*, p. 180.

comprehensive in scope. In assessing his system, I note immediately his theological appraisal of the religions allows for an enhanced appreciation of their Otherness, and provides a platform for engagement without any diminishing of self-identity. However, the chief significant merit of his proposal is a willingness to affirm a single economy of salvation by the Triune Persons, for he places strong emphasis on the Spirit being understood only in reference to Christ, and his activity as related to the paschal mystery of Christ.⁶² This distinguishes his project from that of other Trinitarian theologians of religions who have elaborated theirs based on a presupposition of a separate economy of the Spirit.⁶³ As Kärkkäinen remarks, the single economy safeguards the specificity of the Spirit in any talk of him within a Trinitarian context.⁶⁴ Hence, his explicit assertion of a single economy is more promising inasmuch as it seeks to associate the activity of the Spirit and the work of Christ. Despite this, there remain some critical issues that require further examination.

Firstly, since D'Costa's Trinitarian understanding of the religions is closely aligned to the mainline Catholic position, it is intensely dependent on his interpretation of the Conciliar and post-Conciliar documents. While he has canvassed a vast range of documents to support his position that religions *per se* are not seen as salvific, one surprising and prominent omission is *Dialogue and Proclamation* 29, which contains apparently a strong affirmation of the salvific value of religious traditions when it states, "(t)he mystery of salvation reaches out to them [non-Christians] . . . *Concretely, it will be in the sincere practice of what is good in their own religious traditions*" (emphasis added).⁶⁵ Dupuis, Knitter and Plaiss, have interpreted this section as containing the clearest magisterial indication that salvation for others is attained through the practice of what is good in

⁶² D'Costa, *Meeting*, p. 110.

⁶³ See for example Yong who argues a failure to differentiate between the two economies "risks the subordination of the mission of the Spirit to that of the Son and ultimately to an ecclesiological definition of soteriology". A. Yong, *Discerning the Spirits: A Pentecostal-Charismatic Contribution to Christian Theology of Religions* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), p. 64. Later, these views are moderated as he realizes a well-constructed Pneumatological theology of religions is ultimately a Trinitarian theology of religions since the Spirit is the Spirit of Jesus. *Ibid.*, "As the Spirit Gives Utterance: Pentecost, Intra-Christian Ecumenism and the Wider Oikoumene," *International Review of Mission* 92 (2003), p. 308.

⁶⁴ V.-M. Kärkkäinen, "How to Speak of the Spirit among Religions: Trinitarian 'Rules' for a Pneumatological Theology of Religions," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 30 (2006), p. 123.

⁶⁵ The complete text of *Dialogue and Proclamation* is accessible from the Vatican website, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/interelg/documents/rc_pc_interelg_doc_19051991_dialogue-and-proclamatio_en.html (accessed May 19, 2011)

their own religions by the activity of the Spirit.⁶⁶ However, any sustained explicit analysis of this article is conspicuously absent from his works. In an earlier review of Dupuis' book, he suggested Dupuis had correctly concluded religions *do* mediate salvation through their structures rather than despite them.⁶⁷ Schmidt-Leukel too argues the position that religions are a preparation is in direct conflict with *Dialogue and Proclamation* 29, but unfortunately, this point was not taken up during his rebuttal.⁶⁸ In a recent essay, he notes the drafters of the article included Dupuis, though he conceded that does not affect its authoritative status.⁶⁹ Given the significance and import of this documentary section for the status of religions, a fuller exposition about its theological place among the post-Conciliar pronouncements would have been illuminating.

Secondly, D'Costa's theology contains an underlying assumption which significantly alters one of the two main postulates of the theology of religions, namely, the universality of salvific will. Beginning in *TRP*, he writes that underlying the traditional typology was the axiom of, "*the universal salvific will of God*". (emphasis original) [p.18].⁷⁰ Subsequently, in his paper, "Towards a Trinitarian Theology of Religions", this universality axiom became modified as, "God loves and desires the salvation of all men and women, thereby emphasising the *universality* of grace." (emphasis original)⁷¹ There is an unaccounted movement here from the assertion of a universal salvific will to universal salvific *grace* which affects the subsequent trajectory of his theology. While the former finds biblical support,⁷² the transposition from this to the latter seems to conflate the sovereign and salvific will of God and does not appear to provide any theological territory to the possibility of a distinction between the "decretive" and "preceptive" will of God, the former referring to God's will of

⁶⁶ M. Plaiss, "'Dialogue and Proclamation' a Decade Later: A Retreat?," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 38 (2001), p. 190; Knitter, *Introducing*, p. 82; J. Dupuis, *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1997), pp. 178–9.

⁶⁷ G. D'Costa, "Review: *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism*. By Jacques Dupuis," *Journal of Theological Studies* 49 (1998), p. 910. Prof. D'Costa has recently clarified he is no longer in agreement with Dupuis' positive assessment of this article. Email communication, dated 13 Nov 2011.

⁶⁸ P. Schmidt-Leukel, "On Claimed 'Orthodoxy', Quibbling with Words, and Some Serious Implications: A Comment on the Tilley-D'Costa Debate About Religious Pluralism," *Modern Theology* 24 (2008), p. 284 n. 18; G. D'Costa, "Orthodoxy and Religious Pluralism: A Response to Perry Schmidt-Leukel," *Modern Theology* 24 (2008).

⁶⁹ G. D'Costa, "Traditions and Reception: Interpreting Vatican II's 'Declaration on the Church's Relation to Non-Christian Religions'," *New Blackfriars* 92 (2011), p. 499.

⁷⁰ Also, see his initial description of this axiom as, "God *desires* the salvation of all humankind" (emphasis added). D'Costa, *John Hick's Theology*, p. 3.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, "Towards," p. 140.

⁷² E.g. 1 Tim 2:3–4: "This is good, and it is pleasing in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth." (ESV)

purpose that is always accomplished, and the latter, his will of command which ought to be obeyed but could be transgressed.⁷³ Because of this modification, “universal salvific grace” is treated as a theological construct effectively decoupled from the Christ-event, and seemingly theologically *prior* to the two economic Persons. In *Meeting*, the discussion was shifted into Trinitarian categories, yet the underlying assumption of *a priori* grace remains. Firstly, the categories of natural and supernatural grace were collapsed such that all grace is viewed as salvific and universal. Thus, the grace in other religions was seen as “*not* in terms of a division between the grace of creation and the grace of salvation” (emphasis original) [pp.108–109]. In terms of revelation, salvific grace is seen to be “operative in other religions” even though they do not possess supernatural revelation [p.105], raising the question of the exact association between this revelation and supernatural grace. Regarding the relationship between the Divine Persons and grace, the Spirit is only briefly discussed as the One “mediating grace to those who seek God sincerely” [p.106],⁷⁴ while the significance of the Christ-event in accomplishing this grace is minimized. Given the prior assertion of salvific grace to be found universally, the conclusion of “Christ-like” religious Others to be found in the religions is almost theologically inevitable, and does not appear to differ in kind from the theory of anonymous Christians, even though he had rejected Rahnerian transcendental anthropology and posited a closer Spirit-Christ connection. Because of the lack of a clear economic connection between grace with the operations of the Spirit and Christ, the subsequent outworking of his theology at times seems more governed by an implicit theology of grace rather than the operations of the divine Persons as should befit a *Trinitarian* theology of religions.

Finally, it is questionable whether his recent proposal of the limbo of the just is a theologically coherent position to locate the post-mortem condition of the non-culpable non-Christian for the following three reasons. Firstly, placing the non-Christian in the limbo of just suggests the non-Christian occupies a theological position

⁷³ R. A. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics: The Rise and Development of Reformed Orthodoxy, Ca. 1520 to Ca. 1725*, 2nd ed., 4 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003), pp. III.450–2. It should be noted an unconstrained view of universal salvific grace might border on *apokatastasis* or at least pluralism as a theoretic consequence, though D'Costa himself did not draw such a conclusion. This was Knitter's perceptive analysis of Ruokanen's tentative suggestion of the simultaneous presence of both supernatural and natural grace in the Trinitarian *opera ad extra*, that it ultimately leads to pluralism. P. F. Knitter, “Author's Reply,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 14 (1990), p. 178; M. Ruokanen, “Author's Reply,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 14 (1990), p. 123.

⁷⁴ D'Costa was following John Paul II's thinking in his book, John Paul II, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, trans., V. Messori (London: Cape, 1994), p. 81.

analogous to the OT Fathers, which contravenes his own assertion of a *sui generis* Judaism-Christianity connection. D'Costa argues he does not intend to diminish this and that his view is supported by patristic interpretations of 1 Pet 3:18–4:6, including by Clement of Alexandria.⁷⁵ Even if the hermeneutical difficulties associated with this passage were bracketed, there remains the risk of obscuring a crucial difference between the Fathers and the non-Christian. While the former are the recipients of supernatural revelation, the latter, as he has previously reasoned, should be seen as only having the possibility of general revelation.⁷⁶ This is further supported by NA 2's restraint on applying the term *revelation* to OT Judaism and not to non-Christian religions.⁷⁷ Hence, locating the post-mortem condition of the non-Christian within limbo runs the danger of downplaying the special revelation received by the Fathers, over-elevating the significance of the general revelation she has received, and casts doubts on his system's ability to preserve a singular Judaism-Christianity relationship.

In addition, the limbo of the just is not a theologically appropriate category for the non-Christian because, unlike the OT Fathers, she has not exhibited a pre-mortem explicit faith response to the covenant promises of God subsequently revealed in the NT to be centered on Christ. D'Costa argues in the post-mortem situation, the non-culpable non-Christian encounters Christ in his descent, thereby satisfying one of the conditions of salvation, i.e. *fides ex auditu*.⁷⁸ However, this confuses the situation since the basis for the OT Fathers being in limbo was because they had *already* exhibited *fides* through the hearing of God's Word proclaimed by the OT prophets.⁷⁹ In patristic theology, limbo served as a conceptual device to explain how these Fathers were saved, based upon, among other criteria, their prior faith response, which is ultimately a response to God, just as post-messianic Christians' faith responses to Christ were ultimately to God. It would be a theological *petitio principii* to suggest the non-Christian, who could not have made such a pre-mortem faith response to supernatural revelation, will be in limbo like the Fathers.

Finally, D'Costa suggests the non-necessity of a post-mortem conversion experience since a non-Christian being in limbo suggests "Christ preached to those who *would have followed him* had they

⁷⁵ D'Costa, *CWR*, pp. 174–5.

⁷⁶ G. D'Costa, "Revelation and World Religions," in *Divine Revelation*, ed. P. Avis (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 1997), p. 133.

⁷⁷ D'Costa, *Meeting*, p. 103.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, *CWR*, p. 29.

⁷⁹ As Carson puts it, the OT believers were "responding in faith to special revelation, and were not simply exercising some sort of general 'faith' in an undefined 'God'". D. A. Carson, *The Gagging of God* (Leicester: Apollos, 1996), p. 298.

heard the gospel, the just, and so did not require a total change of heart and a full conversion" (emphasis added).⁸⁰ This seems to suggest there are two possible salvific channels, the first being a pre-mortem reception of the gospel message and a consequent pre-mortem faith response, while the second is based on a form of "middle knowledge" that allows for divine knowledge of who would/would not have accepted the gospel among the unevangelized. However, this invoking of middle knowledge does not seem to preserve adequately the unmerited character of divine grace, for it implies salvation is based on an individual's potential decision to respond to God rather than his sovereign will. The postulate of the existence of the second "path" as a maturation additionally invites the question of whether Christian conversion can be substituted by a series of continuous developments absent of discontinuity as experienced by those who are on the first "path" through conversion and a second birth.⁸¹ Hence, there remain difficulties with the proposal of the limbo of the just as a suitable post-mortem condition for the non-culpable non-Christian.

The above discussion has presented a critical evaluation of D'Costa's Trinitarian theology of religions. While there are major merits in his proposal, including his appreciation of the Other and his positing of a single economy of salvation, I have noted several points of intra-systematic inconsistencies that deserve further clarification, including his interpretation of post-Conciliar sources and a possible conflation of universal salvific will and grace. In particular, his novel proposal of limbo was analyzed to contain difficulties pertaining to its reconciliation with the rest of his system and could undermine his efforts to engage with the religions.

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⁸⁰ D'Costa, *CWR*, p. 172.

⁸¹ Rahner describes conversion as involving a fundamental decision to commit the entirety of life to God as a response to God's call, and signifies a discontinuity in life. K. Rahner, "Conversion," in *Sacramentum Mundi. Vol. 4*, ed. K. Rahner (London: Burns & Oates, 1968), p. 4.