The Trinity and the Religions: An evaluation of Gavin D’Costa’s theology of religions

Toward a Trinitarian Theology of Religions

Since the 1970s there has been a flood of theological literature written on religions, plurality and pluralism. We could assume that the challenge of a plurality of religions today is new in the history of theology. However, Christianity originated in a situation of plurality and the early church grew alongside other religions. Only when Constantine made Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire did the challenge of plurality begin to subside. The urgency of facing the challenge today is exacerbated by the breaking down of Western Christendom and the spread of global communications technology which increases awareness of plurality. However, Kärkkäinen notes the real problem:

“... is not so much the plurality of religions as it is the rapidly spreading mindset according to which plurality should lead to pluralism, the latter meaning something like a rough parity between religions while none having the final authority...”

Theological responses to plurality vary. Hick argues for a pluralistic reformulation of Christian theology with ‘god’ at the centre around which all the religions (including Christianity) revolve. The opposite extreme is exclusivism where salvation is only found through faith in Jesus Christ (no salvation outside the church) and religious truth is limited to Christianity. Some suggest Karl Barth represents this position, but this is a misunderstanding of Barth who is actually more inclusivist. Inclusivism is located between exclusivism and pluralism. It holds Jesus Christ as the ‘unique and normative revelation of God’ who is the saviour of all. However people are saved (through Christianity or outside) it will be through him. This means religious truth could be found outside and inside of Christianity. Examples of people who hold an inclusivist position are Clark Pinnock and John Stott.

This three-fold typology of pluralism, inclusivism and exclusivism coined by Alan Race in the 1983 is common in the literature. However, is not without its criticism. Firstly, it ignores both the variety of the positions that theologians in one category may hold and the fact that they fit into more than one category. Secondly, D’Costa vociferously argues that pluralism is actually a covert form of exclusivism. Pluralism instead of affirming all traditions is actually tradition specific, with Christian

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2. Ibid., p.2; See also McGrath, A., ‘The Challenge of Pluralism for the Contemporary Church’, p.365
3. For a summary and criticism of Hicks arguments see Pannenberg, W., ‘Religious Pluralism and Conflicting Truth Claims’, pp.96-106
7. Ibid., p.63
9. Migliore, D., *Faith Seeking Understanding*, p.306; See D’Costa, G., *Christianity and World Religions*, pp.6-7 where in trying to give a more complete description he breaks down the categories further by adding subcategories for each one.
pluralism being based on western liberal modernity. D’Costa therefore rejects the typology as inadequate for categorising the various theological responses to the plurality of religions. However a universally agreed replacement for this typology which adequately gives a description of the complex variety found in the theology of religions has not appeared.

The critique of pluralism as being tradition specific shows that pluralist proclamations of neutrality and equality in regard to religious belief are far from neither. Covert exclusivist assumptions and beliefs (‘you must believe my neutral way of seeing the religions’) will always hide behind a proclamation of neutrality. This reminds us of the impossibility of having a neutral framework when it comes to theology. McGrath comments:

“... why should we accept a liberal interpretative standpoint, which owes little if anything to Christian beliefs and is only ‘objective’ in the minds of those who espouse it? All vantage points are committed, in some way or another ... Is there not a real need to develop an authentically Christian framework by which religious experience in general may be interpreted?”

To develop a specific Christian framework for religious experience and the theology of religions it is important go beyond questions of salvation and religious truth, which other religions also debate. A unique Christian theology of religions will be based on the distinctive Trinitarian nature of God within Christianity. We focus not just on the questions of salvation in Christ, but also the place of the Father and the Spirit. One theologian who considers this challenge seriously is Gavin D’Costa.

Gavin D’Costa’s Trinitarian theology of religions

D’Costa, a Catholic theologian, began writing on the theology of religions in 1986. His initial theology was indebted to the work of Karl Rahner and he espoused the three-fold typology. In the mid-1990s he began to move away from this position seeking to develop a more solidly Trinitarian theology of the religions. D’Costa has published two significant works which outline his Trinitarian theology of religions and we discuss both here.

In Christ, the Trinity and Religious Plurality D’Costa argues that the doctrine of the Trinity enables a uniquely Christian response to religions which takes their historical manifestations seriously. The Father is made known through the historical activity of the Spirit and until the eschaton the Father will not be fully known (face to face). In the meantime the Spirit deepens our

11 It is significant that earlier in his career D’Costa defended and promoted this typology but he now wants to humbly admit he was wrong and has come to see the typology as redundant. See D’Costa, G., ‘The impossibility of a pluralist view of religions’, p223
14 Ibid., p.17
15 Ibid., p.17
understanding of him. D’Costa outlines his Trinitarian proposal through five theses. Firstly, Trinitarian Christology avoids exclusivism and pluralism by “dialectically relating the universal and the particular.”

God is not revealed exclusively in Jesus, but Jesus is God. The Father is known through Jesus and the Spirit, and this avoids a form of exclusivism. God cannot be spoken about without speaking about the particularity of Jesus, which overcomes pluralism. The universal and particular are held together.

Secondly, D’Costa says that “Pneumatology allows the particularity of Christ to be related to the universal activity of God in the history of humankind.” The Spirit connects Christ to history and biblically the Spirit and Word are involved in history from the beginning of creation. God’s action in history has not ceased therefore and Christians should be willing to learn from God’s self-revelation wherever it occurs, including non-Christians.

Thirdly, the Trinity shows loving relationship is the proper mode of being which means love of neighbour, including non-Christian one, is essential. Fourthly, “The normativity of Christ involves the normativity of Crucified self-giving love.” Neighbour love is exemplified by Jesus’ crucified self-giving love which led to loving suffering service to bring God’s kingdom and not manipulation, power or coercion. Following in Christ’s footsteps and may mean working with (through interreligious dialogue) or against non-Christians. The promotion of the ‘kingdom’ by non-Christians may challenge the church about her living out of the kingdom.

Fifthly, “The church stands under the judgement of the Holy Spirit, and if the Holy Spirit is active in the world religions, then the world religions are vital to Christian faithfulness.” The Holy Spirit guides us into all truth and, as well as in showing God’s self-disclosure in world religions, may speak through them in judgement upon the church. We therefore need to listen both to God and our non-Christian neighbour. We may hear narratives of oppression perpetrated by the church and narratives of holiness where we discern and affirm God’s activity. We also listen to enable indigenization of Christianity in other cultures. What a non-Christian learns from this encounter is solely their prerogative. For D’Costa the Trinitarian approach enables the reconciling of “both the exclusivist emphasis on the particularity of Christ and the pluralist emphasis on God’s universal activity in history.” He wants to move beyond the labels of exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism.

We now consider D’Costa’s work The meeting of the Religions and the Trinity where he develops his arguments using Vatican II and post-conciliar documents. Firstly, he asks whether other religions can be salvific structures. After examining conciliar and post-conciliar documents D’Costa concludes

16 Ibid., p.17
17 Ibid., p.18
18 Ibid., p.19
19 Ibid., pp.19-20
20 Ibid., p.20
21 Ibid., p.22
22 Ibid., p.23
23 Ibid., pp.24-25
24 Ibid., pp.25-26
25 Ibid., p.19
26 Ibid., p.26
27 In this paper we specifically concentrate on chapter four of D’Costa, G., The meeting of the Trinity in the religions, (New York: Orbis, 2000)
we cannot give an unqualified positive affirmation that salvation and divine revelation can be found in other religions. Non-Christians may be saved given various qualifications. Goodness and truth may be found in other religions and the Holy Spirit may use the ‘seeds of the Word’ contained there. However, instead of an a priori judgement about truth in other religions, this judgement can only be made a posteriori after examining each historical case. D’Costa comments, “There is never the question of any wholehearted ‘yes’ or ‘no’, but rather always a ‘yes’ and ‘no’, and the balance of each is in accordance with the subject matter at hand.” Even though the Spirit is the source of the humanity’s religious questions we cannot affirm other religions as sources of salvation and grace apart from Christ. The Spirit’s work is not an alternative to Christ but prepares hearts for the gospel.

Secondly, D’Costa considers the Trinity in relation to other religions. He acknowledges the possibility of the Spirit’s active presence in non-Christians. This does not contradict the church being necessary for salvation because:

“...whenever God is present, this is the presence of the Triune God; and it is this Triune God who is the foundation of the church. Hence ... the Holy Spirit’s presence within other religions is both intrinsically Trinitarian and ecclesiological.”

There is unity in the Trinity and the Spirit’s work cannot be divorced from work of Christ or the Father. The Spirit’s presence equals the presence of the whole Trinity and the Trinity forms the church. D’Costa then argues the possibility of mutual transformation, through the Spirit, of the church and the other. The other may be transformed by the gospel and the church may come to a deeper understanding of itself through the other. We discern the Spirit’s work through the imperfectly formed presence of the Kingdom of God. The Spirit has the same role (if thwarted) in other religions as in the church ie. to make people more Christ-like. The Spirit always draws us towards following the command of love. The Spirit does not bring new revelation from other religions but a deepening understanding of the existing revelation through Christ. Truth and grace found outside of the church can never contradict the new creation inaugurated in Jesus. Awareness of God’s possible work in and through other religions should lead Christianity to having a “critical and reverential openness toward other religions.” Discernment of the Spirit’s active

28 D’Costa, G., The Meeting of the Religions and the Trinity, p.105
29 Ibid., pp.103-104
30 Ibid., pp.105-106
31 Ibid., p.106
32 Ibid., p.107
33 Ibid., p.108
34 Ibid., pp.109-110
35 Ibid., p.110
36 Ibid., pp.110-111
37 Ibid., p.112
38 Ibid., p.114
39 Ibid., p.115
40 Ibid., p.132
41 Ibid., p.122
42 Ibid., p.126
43 Ibid., p.115
presence in other religions leads us to a closer knowledge and experience of the Triune God. D’Costa is clear that there should be no abstract talk about the Spirit in other religions but it must come from specific engagements with non-Christian religions and cultures.

Lastly in this chapter, D’Costa argues that a Trinitarian theology gives a better foundation for openness in relation to other religions than pluralism. We are open towards other religions because the Trinity affirms that God works and continues to work in history. A priori commitment to Christian belief cannot lead to an a priori negation of other religions without engagement with them. In this midst of this engagement the church may find itself challenged and may need to be open to learn from other religions.

**Evaluation of D’Costa’s Theology of Religions**

As we evaluate D’Costa’s proposals it is important to understand what he is not trying to do. D’Costa does not intend to give a detailed theological exploration of the Trinity. Nor does he seek to present a fully worked theology, Kärkkäinen comments in relation to *The Meeting of the Religions and the Trinity*: “D’Costa’s work, while bringing to maturity several themes from his earlier works, is still embryonic and more in the nature of an outline.” D’Costa also does not seek to place all religions under a single theological framework, but through a Trinitarian theology he focuses on the engagement of Christianity with other religions. He is happy to live with the tension of both affirmation and denial in encounter with other religions, not wishing to judge religion a priori but a posteriori.

First, some positive affirmations about method. D’Costa wants to keep hold of the particularity of Christ as the revelation of God whilst acknowledging the work of God in the world through the Spirit. The particularity of the Christianity and the universality of religion are brought together in a Trinitarian model which enables us to move beyond both pluralism and exclusivism. D’Costa also avoids dividing the Trinity, one person of the Godhead is always accompanied by the whole Godhead and there is no abstract concept of the Spirit independently from the Father and the Son. D’Costa skilfully holds onto unity and diversity in a Trinitarian model.

We now make some critical reflections. Firstly, Kärkkäinen criticises D’Costa’s narrow range of sources as being too specific to the modern Catholic tradition. Flett rejects this, arguing that

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44 Ibid., p.115  
45 Ibid., p.128  
46 Ibid., p.133  
47 Ibid., p.133  
48 Ibid., p.133  
49 Flett, J, ‘In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit: a critical reflection on the Trinitarian theologies of religion of S. Mark Heim and Gavin D’Costa.’, p.83  
50 Kärkkäinen, V., *Trinity and Religious Pluralism*, p.67  
51 Flett, J., ‘In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit: a critical reflection on the Trinitarian theologies of religion of S. Mark Heim and Gavin D’Costa.’ p.74  
54 Kärkkäinen, V., *Trinity and Religious Pluralism*, p.76
D’Costa’s Catholic sources are based on established Trinitarian doctrine.\textsuperscript{55} The reality probably incorporates both Kärkkäinen’s and Flett’s views. With Flett, we affirm D’Costa sources are based on established Trinitarian doctrine and therefore D’Costa’s theology has a solid foundation which can only be built upon. However, Kärkkäinen’s criticism of the narrow use of sources is valid. D’Costa makes little use of sources from other Christian traditions. His proposals would be strengthened by including an assessment of the response to religions of the early church and the church fathers. This would enable D’Costa to ask whether what he draws from modern Catholic sources is a new and valid development in the history of theology. There is also little use of biblical material outside the gospel of John. A Trinitarian theology of religion needs to be developed in the light of those scriptures which directly or indirectly relate to other religions. Pinnock, for example, outlines the scriptural data on the themes of false religion and true religion, which includes both positive and negative responses to other religions.\textsuperscript{56} Combining Pinnock’s work at this point with D’Costa’s would provide a firmer basis for some of D’Costa’s conclusions whilst helping fill out of the detail.

Secondly, in focussing on mutual dialogue does D’Costa loose something of the urgency of mission? Whilst D’Costa would answer ‘no’ to this question, his theology of religions is so geared towards mutual dialogue that there is little discussion of how mission fits into this dialogue. D’Costa’s desire to avoid exclusivism seems to emphasise dialogue at the expense of mission. He focuses on relationship towards other religions whilst not discussing the church’s role in bringing non-Christians to Christ. Netland in contrast rightly observes that “The Christian gospel is inherently missionary.”\textsuperscript{57} The challenge for D’Costa’s theology is for this mission to be orientated in a Trinitarian way. The same Spirit at work in other religions is the same Spirit who propelled the early disciples to mission “in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth”\textsuperscript{58}, so there needs to be a more nuanced understanding of the different roles of the Spirit in relation to other religions. The tension between the proclamation of the gospel and mutual dialogue needs to be more thoroughly explored, including praxis. Proclamation should not drown out listening and listening should not displace proclamation. How might the Trinity bring a unique perspective on this tension? May be a perichoretic relationship between dialogue and proclamation is a way forward where proclamation indwells dialogue and dialogue indwells proclamation.

Thirdly, D’Costa’s focus on the activity of the Holy Spirit in other religions appears to be solely about the present engagement of the church with other religions. It may be possible to go further than D’Costa and elaborate a Trinitarian theology of the historical development of other religions which affirms the unique revelation found in the Trinity whilst not \textit{a priori} attributing the development of other religions to demonic influences or human rebellion against God. There may be a role for the activity of the Spirit in the historical development of other religions, however ambiguous this is. D’Costa hints at possible moves in this direction, but never develops it. For example, when discussing the possibility of interreligious prayer he says “Prayers from other religious traditions can be moved and be authentic promptings by the Holy Spirit.”\textsuperscript{59} He also sees the Spirit being the

\textsuperscript{55} Flett, J., ‘In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit: a critical reflection on the Trinitarian theologies of religion of S. Mark Heim and Gavin D’Costa,’. p.83
\textsuperscript{56} Pinnock, C., \textit{A wideness in God’s Mercy}, pp.85-106; See also Kärkkäinen, \textit{An Introduction to the theology of religions: Biblical, historical, and contemporary perspectives}, pp.33-54
\textsuperscript{57} Netland, H., \textit{Encountering Religious Pluralism}, p.324
\textsuperscript{58} Acts 1:8 (NIV)
\textsuperscript{59} D’Costa, G., \textit{The Meeting of the Religions and the Trinity}, p.152
“source of humanity’s existential and religious questioning”. It could be possible to see this as the foundation for the development of other religions whilst not denying the particularity of other religions. D’Costa’s emphasises not making a priori judgements about religions, but making a posteriori judgements after dialogue which implies that there may not be just one universal account of the historical development of religions. Each religion would have its own account which takes into account its own historical particularity and the role of the Spirit within that. It is important to note that this would look different from Pannenberg’s theology of religions. Pannenberg sees the history of religions as being related to contested truth claims in the search for divinity which will only be resolved at the Eschaton. Whilst not denying the issue of truth, a theology of the historical development of religions for D’Costa would focus on the presence of the Trinitarian God in the history of those religions and the development of Kingdom like characteristics within them.

Fourthly, we question whether D’Costa really moves beyond an inclusivist position. He affirms the possibility of saving grace existing in other religions but he does not want to affirm other religions unqualifiedly as ‘salvific structures’. He allows the possibility that there could be salvation for those who have not heard about Jesus and that “elements within a religion may be used by the Holy Spirit in mediating grace to those who seek God sincerely.” However this grace is not a grace that brings the full experience of sanctification and redemption found in the church. D’Costa sees other religions as finding their fulfilment in Christianity, in that the preparation for the gospel found in them is completed in the Trinitarian God. He says that no other religions are salvific whilst leaving open the possibility of God to using them in his grace. Race comments “D’Costa comes close to repeating his former inclusivist views, whereby other traditions are valid contexts of the work of the Spirit but ultimately subordinate to the Christian experience of Christ.” We agree that although D’Costa would like to disavow the three fold typology he ends up sounding inclusivist.

Conclusion

Gavin D’Costa’s theology lays the foundation for a fully Trinitarian relationship towards and understanding of religions. However, his theology is only embryonic and needs development. We have suggested three ways in which this Trinitarian development could progress. Firstly, by a wider use of sources. Secondly, developing a link between dialogue and proclamation. And finally, exploring the relevance of D’Costa’s proposals for the historical development of individual religions.

60 D’Costa, G., The Meeting of the Religions and the Trinity, p.107
61 Kärkkäinen, V., Trinity and Religious Pluralism, pp.82-83
62 D’Costa, G., The Meeting of the Religions and the Trinity, pp.105,109
63 Ibid., p.106
64 Ibid., p.107
65 Ibid., p.114
66 Kärkkäinen, V., Trinity and Religious Pluralism, p.70
67 Race, A., Interfaith Encounter, p.119
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