

Dominus Iesus, Or Rather, Servus Iesus

A Comment on Cardinal Ratzinger's *Dominus Iesus*

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As a scholar it is very often discouraging, and really embarrassing, to read Vatican documents. They are so often full of bald assertions, frequently sustained by citations of previous bald assertions, even of the authors themselves. Cardinal Ratzinger's Declaration *Dominus Iesus* is unfortunately no exception. It is essentially an expansion of an earlier document Cardinal Ratzinger wrote and delivered before the doctrinal committee of the Latin American bishops, which contained serious errors in citing the theologians he was attacking; these errors stemmed in no small measure from the fact that he constantly cited his American opponent from a hostile Italian language secondary source—which revealed more about the views of the Italian author and Cardinal Ratzinger than about the American theologian.

Another embarrassment for scholars in this Declaration is the slippery use of key terms which are not carefully explained. For example, what does it mean to say that, Jesus has an *absolute* significance or value? The term "absolute" literally means unlimited, with no exceptions. Does it here mean that, Jesus has significance and value for every person? If so, who could disagree? But might not one also say the same of Gutenberg for having invented the printing press, or Jonas Salk, the inventor of the polio vaccine, or....? Again, what does it mean to say that, Jesus is the *definitive* self-revelation of God? Are there no manifestations of God outside of Jesus? No Christian would make such a counter-biblical claim. What then does *definitive* mean in these sentences? Again, God's self-revelation in Jesus is said to be *unique*. What precisely is being claimed here, for is not every person unique? These and other critical terms are used in very imprecise and cloudy ways, which is surely not appropriate in a document which purports to clarify theological and philosophical issues.

Still a third embarrassment is the way Cardinal Ratzinger proceeds to preemptively dismiss positions seriously maintained by theologians or philosophers either by simply listing them with the implication that they are obviously errors of judgment, or disemboweling them by giving them a pejorative name which the authors would most likely reject. One such listed "erroneous" position is: "the inexpressibility of divine truth, even by Christian revelation." Surely no one would claim that nothing can be known or expressed about "divine truth"—presumably referring to statements about God. At the same time, no one, including Cardinal Ratzinger, would claim that it is possible to express in a complete way the truth about God. Hence, it must be the latter, not the former, that any theologian would be referring to were s/he to use terminology such as "the inexpressibility of divine truth," and if that is the case, wherein lies the problem or "error"?

Again, Cardinal Ratzinger implies as erroneous: "opposition posited between the logical mentality of the West and the symbolic mentality of the East." Surely every serious Christian theologian is aware of the dramatically different mentalities of the ancient Hebrew and Greek worlds at the time of Jesus. For Jesus, as a Jew, the "big" question was not, How must I **think**? but, What must I **do**? The Jews, from before the time of Jesus to today, have many commandments, *halachah*, but very little in the way of creeds. Jesus said, "Not those who **say** 'Lord, Lord,' but those who **do** the will of God will..." That is, those who "give food to the hungry, drink to the thirsty, clothe the naked....will enter into the kingdom of heaven."

The Jew Jesus was asked not, What are the greatest **doctrines**, but, What are the greatest **commandments**?—in brief: What must I **do**? In contrast, what were the major concerns and products of the great Ecumenical Councils which rocked the first centuries of religious freedom of the

Christian world? They were: What was the nature of God (one God, three Gods, three Persons in one God.....)? What was the nature of Jesus (true God who just appeared to be human, true human who was “adopted” by God, true God and true human....)?—in brief: What must I **think**? It was this “Greek” abstract mentality that then produced a plethora of creeds: Apostles Creed, Nicene Creed, Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, Athanasian Creed....all the way up to creeds of the last few popes.

Today, surely every Christian New Testament scholar and every trained theologian is aware that the Jews spoke in “picture language,” using a multitude of metaphors, symbols, myths, and stories. What Catholic theological or biblical scholar today would understand the two Genesis creation stories and Garden of Eden stories as some kind of historical accounts rather than **mythoi**? Who would mistake the Jew Jesus’ parables as being as about historical “men who went out to sow seed,” or about people who should physically “pluck out their eyes,” or a specifically historical shepherd who went to look for a lost sheep? Surely every contemporary Catholic Scripture scholar and trained theologian realizes that the ancient Hebrew story teller, and all subsequent Jews, including Jesus and his Jewish followers, would have been shocked and scandalized were they told that when the first line of Genesis spoke of the “spirit of God hovering over the deep” that that was the Third Person of the Blessed Trinity. Such a (Greek) “metaphysical” mentality was clearly foreign to their (Semitic) more “metaphorical” mentality. Then, wherein lies the problem or error?

Cardinal Ratzinger deliberately dismisses the thinking and language of the pluralist theologians by using a concept and term that they do not use. He puts in their minds and mouths the concept/term “relativism,” when it is clear that they are talking about and using the concept/term “relational.” To accuse the pluralist theologians of “relativism” is to insult the intelligence not only of those theologians, but also of every knowledgeable reader of this Declaration. Every clear thinking person, upon the slightest reflection, immediately realizes that an alleged position of “relativism” is literally “non-sense.” If all is relative to me, and again to you, and you, and you....then I am not even talking to a real you, or a real anyone else, since everything is totally relative to me We cannot even disagree, for we would have to have something in common which is not “relative” in order to be able to communicate with each other in order to disagree!

No, the concept and term is not an impossible “relativism,” but, as mentioned, “relationality.” After the philosophical advances of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, surely every philosopher and theologian trained in the second half of the twentieth century is aware that all knowledge is something that **I** know, **you** know, **we** know, **they** know. All knowledge exists in the minds of the knowers and comes there through **my, your, our, their** lenses of **my, your, our, their** experiences. As St. Thomas Aquinas noted centuries ago: “Things known are in the knower according to the mode of the knower” (*cognita sunt in cognoscente secundum modum cognoscentis*. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, II-II, q. 1, a. 2). Knowing is in itself a **relational** activity, a unifying relationship between the knower and the known. The knower is essentially involved in the very act of knowing. All knowing is necessarily **related** to the knower.

There is much more to be commented on in this Declaration, but I believe that the foundation of the difficulties that critical thinkers have with the Declaration lies here in these epistemological starting points that Cardinal Ratzinger in a kind of *petitio principii* preemptively dismisses. In many respects, most of the rest of the Declaration is a logical working out of these first positions taken by Cardinal Ratzinger. (As St. Thomas Aquinas states somewhere: A small error in the beginning becomes a huge one in the end.) But, as in every “begging of the question,” those are precisely the points that must be proven, not simply asserted, regardless of the eminence of the authorities that

reassert them in the citations.

What is to be done? All sides need to take each other seriously. We all need to enter into a dialogue, a **serious** dialogue, not a show trial, but a **true** dialogue, which means that both sides come to learn from the other!

This is not a new idea. Already in 1979, in preparation for the Vatican interrogation of Father Edward Schillebeeckx many petitions with thousands of signatures in his support were sent to Rome, including one signed by hundreds of American Catholic theologians urging that “the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith eliminate from its procedures ‘hearings,’ and the like, substituting for them dialogues that would...bring together not only the theologian in question...but also a worldwide selection of the best pertinent theological scholars.... Such a procedure is by no means new; it is precisely the procedure utilized at the Second Vatican Council.” (Quoted in Leonard Swidler, *Küing in Conflict* (New York: Doubleday, 1981, pp. 514-517.)

In 1988 Cardinal Jozef Tomko, Prefect of the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples ,after publishing a speech in which he attacked dialogue-oriented missiologists and theologians (many the same as those attacked now by Cardinal Ratzinger), was asked to grant permission for his speech to be reproduced in a book in which a range of missiologists, missionaries, and theologians would comment on it. He not only graciously consented, but asked for an opportunity to respond to them—which he did in a dialogic manner, that is, in a manner that dealt with them seriously and respectfully. (Paul Mojzes and Leonard Swidler, eds., *Christian Mission and Interreligious Dialogue*. Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1990.)

When Cardinal Ratzinger published his predecessor speech to the Doctrinal Committee of the Latin American bishops, attacking again by name many of the same theologians, he too was invited to enter into a dialogue with them and others, much as Cardinal Tomko did. After much delay and repeated requests, he sent his regrets that he was too busy.

But that will no longer do. We are now in *The Age of Global Dialogue*. As the 1979 document of the American theologians stated: “The function of the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith should be to *promote dialogue!*” Jesus did not come to “lord” (*dominus*) it over us, but to be our “servant” (*servus*). We Christians are called to imitate him—and those who are “leaders” among the Christian community are to be the *servus servorum Dei*, the servant of the servants of God.