

Response to Doran and Dadosky
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I am still enough of a Barthian to be suspicious of the category ‘religion.’ I know we have an ‘American Academy’ committed to it, and I’ve worked in institutions where the study of “it” was the central preoccupation. Nonetheless I don’t think we know what the “it” is. What is “religion” and is it even a “useful” category? Perhaps my suspicion about the term religion is only exceeded by my suspicion about the term “culture.” As Raymond Williams the Marxist sociologist put it, “culture is one of the two or three most difficult words in the English language.” (He never told us what he thought the other two were.) So when Lonergan writes that theology is the mediation between religion and culture, and Fr. Doran and Dr. Dadosky begin their work assuming this as axiomatic,¹ I am not sure I understand how to proceed. How is it possible to distinguish among these terms? Now I hope my raising this question is not just a sophist’s trick. Anyone with a modicum of education knows how to undo any constructive intellectual enterprise by raising the question, “what do you mean by” And since, as Wittgenstein rightly taught us, language has meaning in its use – any ‘definitional’ answer to that sophistical question, ‘what do you mean by . . .’ can always be deconstructed ad infinitum, ad nauseum by finding a context where the definition does not work. By raising the question of these terms, I’m not trying to debase this important conversation. But the use of these terms in this interreligious project is essential. It seems to generate the ‘context’ for the project. So I would like to raise some questions, first about the use of the term ‘religion,’ then ‘culture’ and finally ‘language.’

1. Religion

Beginning with this ‘axiomatic statement’ Doran and Dadosky then seek to mediate theology between the context of a self-identified Christian religion and the cultural matrix of world religions.² This seems to acknowledge that the distinction between religion and culture is very fluid; for ‘religion’ now functions both as that from which theology mediates (the Christian religion) and that to which it mediates (the multireligious world-cultural matrix). The category religion seems to be functioning in at least a dual capacity with different, and perhaps incompatible meanings.

First, ‘religion’ functions as a particular set of convictions. So Doran states, “The unique contributions that Christianity offers to this world-cultural matrix, I would suggest, lie principally in three doctrines: the incarnation of the eternal Word of God in Jesus of Nazareth,

¹ For instance, Doran cites Lonergan ‘A theology mediates between a cultural matrix . . . and the significance and role of a religion in that matrix.’

Dadosky, “Lonergan’s *Method in Theology* begins with an axiomatic statement that theology mediates between religion and culture.”

² Doran writes, “The world-cultural matrix of our day is multireligious, and so a universalist systematic theology, that is, a systematic theology that would mediate Christian faith and *that* cultural matrix based in the conviction of the universal gift of what Christians call the Holy Spirit, must labor to express the meaning of the mysteries of explicitly Christian faith with a view to communication with sincere believers who adhere to other religious traditions, practices, and communities, and with an openness to receive from those believers the truth and accumulated wisdom of their own heritage.”

the Trinitarian nature of God, and the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. Also central is the implication of the passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus for a non-violent response to the scandal of evil in the world.” Likewise with Dadosky the mediation seems to begin from a particular religious place, the local church, which must then discern its specific practice of inculturation. Religion here functions with a specific history, located in time and space that is easily identifiable. But once this particular religion gets mediated via theology into the cultural matrix a second use of religion arises, which seems to leave this specificity behind. Now religion functions more as a universal essence identifiable independent of the language or practices used. It is more a universal consciousness that bears with it a set of value judgments, which characterize the “universal gift of the Spirit” that allows the specificities of the Christian religion to be mediated into a universal understanding of religion that includes at least Islam, Judaism and Buddhism. My first question then is how do these two uses of religion relate?

Along with this question I would like to raise a theological one, one Doran himself points to, but does not develop in this essay. What is the relation between the Spirit and the Son? Does this pneumatology assume too much distance between them, and therefore between the incarnate Jesus with his specific history and the Spirit’s work? Aquinas argued that in the incarnation the ‘act of assuming’ proceeds from divine power that is common to the three persons and only the ‘terminus’ of the assuming belongs to a Person, which means that any of the Persons could have been incarnate since the act that makes this possible is common to all three. If this is true of the mission of the Son in the incarnation is not equally true of the sending of the Spirit?

2. Culture

If theology mediates religion in a cultural matrix, then what is the assumed relation between ‘religion’ and ‘culture.’ Here I would suggest that the first use of religion – religion as a set of particular convictions or the site of a local church -- comes close to understanding it as a culture. Here I return to Raymond Williams’ sociological analysis of culture. Its complexity, he argued, is not only found in its “intricate historical development,” which includes a shift from culture as a “noun of process” to a “metaphor” of human development, but also because “culture” has become a significant concept in “distinct and incompatible systems of thought.”³ Culture is a metaphor for a kind of ‘cultivation’ that occurs to people through their practices, language, communities, doctrines, etc. Where “culture” once meant how one tilled the soil; today it has more to do with how persons themselves are “tilled.” And that is why culture is such a difficult term. I can easily point to a farmer riding on his ‘cultivator’ (an old-style farm implement that would cover weeds by churning up the soil over them) and know what is meant by the term “cultivator,” but what culture means when I use it as a metaphor for a process that happens to people is much more difficult to discern. If we understand culture in this sense, then we seem quite close to what Lonergan meant by “empirical culture.” But then isn’t religion understood in its specificity as a kind of culture? Yet the second use of ‘religion’ – “the multireligious world-cultural matrix” to which theology mediates religion assumes somehow that religion floats above or outside culture

³ Raymond Williams, “Culture,” in Keywords (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983) p. 87.

such that we must now find a way to mediate religion to it. This seems to assume a very modern understanding of religion that William Cavanaugh has traced in his The Myth of Religious Violence. He shows how 'religio' underwent a shift from being a virtue one cultivated by all the available practices at one's disposal to a modern understanding, begun in the Renaissance primarily with the Christian Platonist thinkers Nicholas of Cusa and Marsilio Ficino where it becomes an "interior and universal impulse" (Cavanaugh, 70-72). If there is an equivocation on the understanding of 'religion' in Lonergan's axiomatic statement, then is it possible it partakes of the – perhaps incommensurable – understanding of 'religio' found both in someone like Aquinas and in its more modern understanding?

3. Language

This brings me to my third concern. Can there be a cultural mediation without a specific language to express it? I affirm the importance of theology's mediation via cultures, and the need for this to be done as an ongoing dynamic practice. In fact, I think this is something of a truism; there is no other way to do theology than in a 'cultural context' because none of us inhabits an objective, universal standpoint from which we can survey the whole and make foundational truth claims. Of course, this does not mean that all our claims to truth are relative and partial for that would still assume some tacit awareness of a foundational truth that somehow relativized our putative partial ones. That we do not have an objective, universal foundation outside of the mediation of culture and language does not logically entail we have no access to universal truth, especially if the doctrine of the incarnation and transubstantiation are true. But it does mean we cannot claim some space outside of language, and therefore culture, that will insure our claims to truth. They will always be advanced within some specific context. I wonder if this gets lost in Lonergan's mediation of religion via theology into a multireligious cultural matrix,. This seems to occur at two places in this project. First is when the Spirit works "beyond the explicit boundaries of the Christian communion. The other is the "second task" identified by Crowe that comes along with the recognition of the Spirit's universal mission. Doran writes, "The second task is far more complex and will take much longer to accomplish. The common language will not be specifically Christian, nor specifically Hindu, Buddhist, Jewish, or Muslim." But what kind of language could this be? Is it universal, a kind of theological Esperanto? If so, will this not inevitably involve the further secularizing of the Christian faith as well as that of Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism and Islam? Which adherents of those faiths or ways of life could accept such a project?

Now let me be clear what I am not saying here. I do not deny that the Holy Spirit works outside the Church. If all things are created in, through and for Jesus Christ, then I would not be surprised to find, as John Howard Yoder put it, those who act "with the grain of the universe" will act according to Christ and the Spirit he sends. But I think I can only say that from within the Christian Church and I recognize that to see Christ and the Spirit present in all places and times is not and never will be a recognition of religious mutuality or pluralism. It is a particular Christian conviction inseparable from the specifics of its language. I don't think this means that I have no place to hear and learn from persons of a differing faith. For instance, I think I understand and agree completely with what Rabbi David Novak means when he writes,

Indeed, these claims, like 'God elects Israel' or 'God is incarnate in Jesus,' are what Judaism and Christianity are all about. In fact, Judaism requires Jews to die as martyrs rather than exchange Judaism for anything else, even something as similar to Judaism as Christianity. Christianity makes a similar claim on Christians. Martyrs are willing to die for what they believe to be the highest truth one could possibly know in this world, because without a commitment to the existence of truth, one cannot affirm the truth of God.

This of course does not mean that he and I have to kill each other. In fact, we have enjoyed a delightful meal before simply from the goodness of God's creation, something we can both affirm and rejoice in. I don't think we have a problem of religious pluralism. I don't fear David Novak's Judaism any more than I fear Irfan's Islamic faith. It is because of their faith, their practices of prayer, obedience, worship that I believe I have less to fear from them than from the powerful secular governments and the institutions they support in the West. Here is where I think I would raise a question about this project. It is only a question. I'm not sure I'm right about this. Has the context within which we must now do theology be properly discerned? Is the problem before us "religious pluralism," or does that still assume the "myth of religious violence," a myth told to the benefit of secular nation states who constructed it in the first place? Is the real problem, how do we do theology in the context of the secular nations that now monopolize our political possibilities, relativizing all other practices to private, a political realms?