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Book Review

A Christology of Religions

By Gerald O'Collins, SJ

Author(s): Christina Atienza

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Book Reviews

A Christology of Religions

By: **Gerald O'Collins, SJ**

Publisher: **Orbis Books (Maryknoll, New York, U.S.A.)**

Year: **2018, Pages: 178 pp.**

ISBN-10: **1626982813**

Price: **\$25.29**

Reviewed by: **Christina Atienza, Graduate Theological Union**

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When it comes to Christian relations with other religions, classical questions posed in the discipline of Theology of Religions concern *why there are many religions at all* and *how these religions fare at mediating salvation for their adherents*. Some theologians believe that this line of questioning has reached a dead-end. Author Gerald O'Collins wants to change the question altogether to: *What does Jesus Christ do for religious "others"?* In so doing, he endeavors to initiate a new theological discipline he calls "Christology of Religions" to replace (or at least reframe) the traditional discipline of Theology (or sometimes Theologies) of Religions. As a theologian who acknowledges the salvific value of religious traditions to their adherents, O'Collins makes an argument for how to present Christology to non-Christians without proselytizing.

In this relatively short, generally accessibly-written book, O'Collins showcases his vast and deep expertise by exploring seven Christological themes, which he holds as key to the Christian confession. Yet he presents his thought through the lens of the religious "other." These themes include the proposed name-change paradigm shift, the theology of the cross (ch. 1), the role of Jesus Christ's priesthood (ch. 2), Christ's ongoing presence and work with the Holy Spirit (ch. 3), the efficacy of the Christian church's intercessory prayers for the religious others (ch. 4), the faith of the suffering others (ch. 5), and proposed criteria for identifying authentic

(other than-Christian) religious experience (ch. 6). The author concludes with a reflection on the state of Christian dialogue and relations with Muslims and Jews from the Second Vatican Council to the present (ch. 7).

Many theologians have attempted to shift the Roman Catholic Church's historically antagonistic and violent stance toward religious others to one that seeks more peaceful interfaith relations and values the salvific role of non-Christian religions for their adherents. While proposing a wholesale paradigm shift, O'Collins views his work as continuous with, and an extension of, that prior work. In addition to advancing his own thought on Christology, he draws much from other sources: 1) from scripture, particularly from Paul in general (Romans in particular) and from Hebrews; 2) from the work of Karl Rahner, Jacques Dupuis, Gavin D'Acosta, Paul Griffiths, and other prominent theologians; and 3) from relevant Roman Catholic Church documents and papal encyclicals from the approximate time of the Second Vatican Council, most prominently from *Nostra Aetate*, *Ad Gentes*, and *Lumen Gentium*, and especially from the writings of Pope John Paul II.

Certain sections of the book are outstanding and groundbreaking. One example is from chapter 1, in the section entitled "Outside the Cross No Christology of Religions" (17-22), inspired by Martin Luther's *extra crucem nulla theologia* (outside the cross no theology). Here O'Collins indicts the theologies of religious discourse as wholly missing the revelation of the centrality of the cross that applies to all humanity. He paints a portrait of Jesus' crucifixion as simultaneously being: (1) in solidarity with the suffering of the innocent; (2) a condemnation of the conditions that produce such suffering; (3) an unequivocal demonstration of how to love those who persecute you; and (4) the most perplexing challenge to human wisdom.

Another example is found in Chapter 2, in the section entitled "Christ's Priesthood and 'the Others'" (45-55). In this section, O'Collins describes seven aspects of Christ's priesthood that are meaningful for religious others: (1) the Eucharist, which embraces all creation; (2) an Adam Christology, which recognizes a series of covenants that God has made with all peoples; (3) a sacerdotal principle, in which all people participate in the role of Christ as priest, prophet, and king; (4) Jesus' vulnerability as

exemplified by his victimhood, which unites him with all who suffer; (5) his wisdom teachings, which have universal applicability and value; (6) his sending of the Holy Spirit to the whole world; and (7) his eternal intercession, not just for those who have been baptized into the Christian communion, but for all humanity. While religious others may question the metaphysical dimensions of O'Collins's proposal, he presents Christ as a resource for all, as one whose boundless goodwill, offering of himself for the improvement of humankind, performatively improves the human condition, thereby establishing the offering of humankind back to God as a changed entity. Might followers of other religious traditions find in this something objectionable? Of course, but O'Collins's theology of Christ's universal priesthood powerfully underscores the Christian faith's unique and enduring offering to all of humanity and not just to those who explicitly follow Christ.

In another chapter, O'Collins acknowledges that some aspects of his proposal may be considered arrogant by religious others. Nevertheless, he responds with a capacity to hold the inherent tensions in various theologies of religions. He notes that "while Christians should not ignore the claims of other religions, they should not play down or misrepresent their own claims about Jesus universally present to mediate salvation and revelation everywhere." In this author's experience, "adherents of other faiths find such dissimulation, even when adopted by Christians for 'the best of reasons,' dishonest and even disrespectful toward partners in interreligious dialogue" (64-65).

In spite of these (and several other) outstanding aspects in O'Collins' proposal, there are a few aspects that might benefit from some improvement. Certain areas of his text are not as accessible, for instance, when he dives into arcane Scholastic terminology in the otherwise excellent chapter on Christ's intercession (ch. 4). Some sections of the text are wanting for more nuanced reflection, such as when O'Collins characterizes intercession as a way of loving others (85) without entertaining the possibility of intercession as an unacknowledged form of condescension toward religious others, as in "May God save these poor pagan babies." Some topics are given short-shrift, such as the single-page section on "Maternal Images of Christ" (65), which could have been

expanded into a richer discourse incorporating the contributions of feminist theologians to Christology. Such improvements might have made this book even more compelling than it already is.

There are also two more serious oversights. First, O'Collins does not address the issue of religious supremacy, which perdures in theologies of religions and stymies interreligious dialogue. He touches on this issue only obliquely when he notes that Pope John Paul II did not consider all religious paths to be equally efficacious. How does O'Collins's Christology of Religions relate to this issue? Second, O'Collins also did not seem to consult with religious others on his proposal. In the final chapter, he indirectly acknowledges the value of such consultation: "[M]y deep conviction is that Jewish scholars keep Christian scholars honest" (158), and yet, he does not appear to avail his viewpoint of such an advantage in this work.

It is clear from the book's central exhortation that O'Collins has written this book primarily for an audience of Christian theologians of religions. He successfully demonstrates that the discourse can be shifted away from the polarizing specters of proselytizing and neutralizing by asking how something that is both particular and dear to the tradition—Christology—can be of benefit to religious others without having to convert them. One could ask, in a similar vein, what does the Buddha do for non-Buddhists or the Prophet Muhammad do for non-Muslims? In addition to offering a new lens for religious pluralism, O'Collins in this book also has much to offer to non-academic Christians who are interested in how they might relate with religious others in constructive and peaceful ways. It should also be assigned reading for ministers who serve in religiously pluralistic areas.

Christina Atienza is a third-year doctoral student in comparative religion at the Graduate Theological Union, and is a Dominican Sister of San Rafael. Her research interests include comparative religion and theology, particularly between Roman Catholicism and Soto Zen Buddhism, theology of religions, phenomenology of interreligious encounters, and inter-monastic dialogue.