

Gavin D'Costa's Theory of the Unevangelized: A Continuing Assessment

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Abstract

Gavin D'Costa has distinguished himself as a leading voice in the field of theology of religions, and not just among Roman Catholics. His Trinitarian approach to the subject has also garnered respect among Protestants, such as Reformed theologian Tan Loe-Joo. Yet Tan is concerned that D'Costa compromises the Trinitarian framework of his approach by conflating universal salvific will and salvific grace, and that his use of limbo falls short of satisfying the scriptural principle that faith comes by hearing (Rom 10:17). This article is an evaluation of D'Costa's theory as it relates to the former issue concerning salvific will and grace. I seek to show that Tan's worry stems more from an incomplete theological delineation of grace than from an actual shift in D'Costa's theological position. I then suggest a solution that provides some common ground from which both Catholic and Protestant theologians can seek a resolution to the latter issue concerning the principle of faith by hearing.

Keywords

Gavin D'Costa, Tan Loe-Joo, Theology of Religions, Question of the Unevangelized, Theology of Grace

Introduction

The Lutheran theologian Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen commends D'Costa for his adherence to the Trinitarian rules of discourse despite recent trends to the contrary, and he declares: "In my opinion, D'Costa's trinitarian theology represents the most nuanced response to other religions from the perspective of classical Christian trinitarian faith."¹ His only concern is that D'Costa diminishes the ecumenical

¹ Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *Trinity and Religious Pluralism: The Doctrine of the Trinity in Christian Theology of Religions* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), 76.

usefulness of his theory by limiting his methodology to Vatican II and post-Conciliar statements. So Kärkkäinen suggests that D'Costa's approach would benefit from being put into "critical dialogue with wider Catholic and non-Catholic voices."² As regards the latter, Tan Loe-Joo's assessment provides a good starting point.

Tan states that "the chief significant merit" of D'Costa's position is that "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."³ Yet he also argues that D'Costa compromises the Trinitarian structure of his theory through his continued efforts to work out Conciliar and post-Conciliar statements on other religions. Tan claims that there "is an unaccounted movement" in his writings, "from the assertion of a universal salvific *will* to universal salvific *grace* which affects the subsequent trajectory of his theology."⁴ In other words, D'Costa's focus on the notion of "universal salvific grace" causes him to treat it "as a theological construct effectively decoupled from the Christ-event, and seemingly theologically *prior* to the two economic Persons."⁵ And, according to Tan, this disconnect between the concept of saving grace and the saving work of Christ and the Spirit is most evident in D'Costa's theory of the unevangelized.⁶ While appreciating Tan's objections, I will argue that a more robust theology of grace will help keep D'Costa's proposal within the Trinitarian rules and also better position his approach for meeting "the ecumenical challenge" of presenting a common Christian witness in a multi-religious world.⁷

The Question of the Unevangelized: A Prospective *Fides Ex Auditu* Option

In his book *Christianity and World Religions (CWR)*, D'Costa grounds his discussion of the unevangelized in the express teaching of the Roman Catholic Church – that a non-Christian can be saved – and "the problems thus left unresolved" by this affirmation.⁸ For instance, Vatican II's *Lumen Gentium* states:

Those also can attain to salvation who through no fault of their own do not know the Gospel of Christ or His Church, yet sincerely seek

² Ibid., 77.

³ Loe-Joo Tan, "Gavin D'Costa's Trinitarian Theology of Religions: An Assessment," *New Blackfriars* (April 2, 2013): 100.

⁴ Ibid., 101; emphasis original.

⁵ Ibid., 102; emphasis original.

⁶ Ibid., 99-104.

⁷ Kärkkäinen, *Trinity and Religious Pluralism*, 77.

⁸ Gavin D'Costa, *Christianity and World Religions: Disputed Questions in the Theology of Religions* (Chichester, U.K.; Malden, Mass: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 162.

God and moved by grace strive by their deeds to do His will as it is known to them through the dictates of conscience.⁹

The difficulty in working out this statement, is that the Catholic Church also teaches that salvation, even for the unevangelized, “is always given by means of Christ in the Spirit and has a mysterious relationship to the Church.”¹⁰ So the question is, how can a person who does not know Christ and his church receive salvation if it ‘is always given’ through this very knowledge?

D’Costa says the “usual answer” given by Catholic theologians is that good non-Christians “can *implicitly* know Christ and his church through an implicit or unconscious desire.”¹¹ Yet he argues that this response does not explain how these people are saved in an eschatological sense, because “final salvation requires not only an ontological and causal, but also an epistemological relationship to Christ.”¹² More precisely:

This salvation won by Christ is only available through faith in Christ, which comes from hearing the gospel preached in this life or the next (*fides ex auditu*), requiring repentance, baptism, and the embracing of a new life in Christ.¹³

From this position, D’Costa claims that the postmortem option “is actually implied in . . . Roman Catholicism” through the “resources” provided by the confession of Christ’s descent into hell (from the Apostles’ Creed).¹⁴

To set up his argument, D’Costa begins by characterizing the type of unevangelized person the Catholic Church teaches can attain salvation. He introduces a hypothetical scenario involving a practicing Buddhist called Jane, who has never heard the gospel but “has lived a good life, following the truth to the best of her ability, in the light of her conscience”; also, “it is assumed that possibilities of the good, true, and beautiful life might be found in positive elements within her

⁹ “*Lumen Gentium*,” *Vatican*, 7, accessed August 6, 2014, http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html.

¹⁰ “*Dominus Iesus*,” *Vatican*, 21, accessed July 30, 2014, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20000806_dominus-iesus_en.html.

¹¹ D’Costa, *Christianity and World Religions*, 163.

¹² *Ibid.*, 24.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 25. The *fides ex auditu* refers to the scriptural principle that saving faith comes by hearing the preaching of the gospel; Rom 10:17.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 162. Two of D’Costa’s primary resources for developing this aspect of his argument are, J. A. DiNoia, *The Diversity of Religions: A Christian Perspective* (Washington, D.C: Catholic University of America Press, 1992); and, Joseph Ratzinger, *Eschatology, Death, and Eternal Life*, trans. Michael Waldstein, 2nd ed., *Dogmatic theology 9* (Washington, D.C: Catholic University of America Press, 2007).

religion” – i.e., opportunities for her to respond “to the promptings of the Holy Spirit.”¹⁵ With this description in place, he states:

The question is: how can original and personal sins be forgiven, how can persons consciously share in the beatific vision, how can they participate in the joy and glory of the risen Lord, without knowing Christ and his church in any possible way when they die as a non-Christian?¹⁶

In other words, how does one account for the *fides ex auditu* in the salvation of Jane? Towards the development of a postmortem solution, D'Costa first seeks to align his project in the tradition of Joseph DiNoia.¹⁷

Joseph DiNoia's Proposal

In his work *The Diversity of Religions*, DiNoia dispenses with the notion of implicit faith and the view that other religions can mediate salvation, and appropriates instead George Lindbeck's idea of the “unsubstitutable uniqueness” of other religions within God's salvific plan.¹⁸ In this way, he suggests that while religions differ in their claims to ultimate reality, this need not rule out the possibility that certain moral aspects of non-Christian religions could end up being a boon to salvation rather than part of that which will be forfeit in the consummation. So while these moral aspects do not produce a present salvific effect, they might nonetheless function as a *preparatio evangelica* orienting a person towards salvation at a future time. DiNoia explains:

A theology of religions developed along these lines could acknowledge the goodness and uprightness of other religious people without ascribing immediate salvific value to these qualities. . . .

At the same time, appropriate Christian valuations of such qualities could be framed in terms of an “eschatological” rather than a present salvific value.¹⁹

His point here is a practical one. Christians can affirm that non-Christians are within the purview of God's salvific plan without

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid., 163.

¹⁷ In 2013, DiNoia was appointed to serve on the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith, which was particularly concerned with the turn Catholic theology had taken in the theology of religions.

¹⁸ DiNoia, *The Diversity of Religions*, 67-68. See also, George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age*, 25th Anniversary Edition. (Louisville: WJK Press, 2009), 40-41.

¹⁹ Ibid., 75.

imposing a direct Christian significance to their religious beliefs and practices. They can trust that "other religious communities, while pursuing their distinctive aims, foster rather than obstruct the development in their members of the disposition to attain and enjoy the true end of life, fellowship with the Blessed Trinity."²⁰

DiNoia insists that this kind of 'prospective' view means Christians can accept the moral practices and doctrinal self-descriptions of other religious communities at face value, while also ascribing "an indirect contributory (broadly providential rather than specifically salvific) value to them."²¹ Still, how does a non-Christian move from merely having a disposition that is conducive to Christian fellowship to actually having a personal relationship with God if they die before hearing the gospel? DiNoia suggests that this dilemma can be resolved "by appeal to the doctrine of purgatory."²²

To be clear, DiNoia does not support the possibility of life-changing decisions after death.²³ Rather, the key idea is that those who die with a disposition conducive to fellowship with God might be able to continue moving towards this destination in purgatory. He states, "Purgatory would involve the realization of the continuities as well as the discontinuities between what they had practiced and believed and what is indeed the case about the true aim of life."²⁴ Thus an unevangelized person's salvation involves a process of personal transformation which begins before death through moral decisions shaped by certain elements within their cultural-religious environments.²⁵

D'Costa is keen to develop DiNoia's proposal further, but he deals first with what he sees as two conflicting claims: "Other religions should be seen as professing different means and ends to that of Christianity while at the same time, he argues, non-Christians in these religions may be justified or in a state of grace."²⁶ The problem is, if the particular aims of other religions are not Christological and their means are not ecclesiological, then how can they orient members towards the beatific vision? And even if the moral elements within other religions do indeed develop the dispositions of members to attain fellowship with God, D'Costa states, "I question whether purgatory can be assimilated to the non-Christian without further argument, as it has traditionally been understood as the

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 67. A description that DiNoia sees as being consistent with Vatican II, see note 3 on same page.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 90.

²² *Ibid.*, 104.

²³ *Ibid.*, 105.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 106.

²⁵ See, *Ibid.*, 103-108.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 190.

process for those who are already epistemologically 'in Christ.'²⁷ In other words, the established understanding of purgatory is that it is an opportunity extended to Christians alone.²⁸ Hence, DiNoia's good non-Christians need explicit faith *before* they can enter purgatory.

How then does a non-Christian who dies with a disposition conducive to faith subsequently obtain faith through hearing the proclamation of the gospel when, in principle, the purgatorial doors are closed to non-Christians? D'Costa writes, "Given the various dogmatic parameters, . . . only in the event of the 'descent' does the unity of the epistemological and ontological take place to answer satisfactorily the question about Jane."²⁹

Before proceeding, we should also note that while DiNoia ascribes only a future-oriented salvific value to moral aspects of other religions, D'Costa does not hesitate to ascribe a present salvific value to these elements. This is not to say that he thinks Jane is now saved. He maintains that there is no salvation outside an objective relation to Christ and his church (e.g., the problem question above). But in light of his reading of the Vatican II statements on non-Christians and other religions, D'Costa seeks to affirm "that there are elements, not structures, of grace within them."³⁰ Similar to DiNoia, he posits a future-oriented salvation and yet argues further for a present-tense relation to grace and the work of the Holy Spirit through conscience and "positive elements" within the religion.³¹ We will discuss more about this part of his theory later as it relates to Tan's assessment.

Incorporating the Doctrine of Christ's Descent into Hell

D'Costa recognizes that the theology of Christ's descent into hell presents "a complex and shifting picture."³² So he seeks to frame the discussion by noting some of the more consistent elements within the Roman Catholic tradition. First, he explains that in Catholic theology hell consists of four dimensions: 1) hell proper, which is "the place of damnation" and "a perduring reality"; 2) the limbo of unbaptized infants, "a state that has always been disputed" and "if it exists, is a perduring reality"; 3) the limbo of the just, "empty after Christ's descent" and "not a perduring reality"; and 4) purgatory, "a place of purification."³³ Second, D'Costa considers the traditional Catholic

²⁷ D'Costa, *Christianity and World Religions*, 189.

²⁸ For example, see, DS 693.

²⁹ D'Costa, *Christianity and World Religions*, 167.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 189. D'Costa reaffirms and further develops this position in, *Vatican II: Catholic Doctrines on Jews and Muslims* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

³¹ *Ibid.*, 162.

³² *Ibid.*, 165.

³³ *Ibid.*, 165-166.

interpretation of the doctrine of descent in light of the theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar.³⁴

The general understanding of the descent is that while Christ's victory on the cross was made known throughout all the levels of hell, he redeemed only those in the limbo of the just. Yet D'Costa explains that "Balthasar argues that the limbos and purgatory are irrelevant" to the doctrine of descent, because "death and damnation are the outcome of sin."³⁵ In other words, Christ not only had to experience death but also alienation, which means "the Son descends into the depths of damnation."³⁶ An assertion that looks rather different from the traditional view, but that Edward Oakes nonetheless insists represents "a legitimate doctrinal development."³⁷ The reason for this insistence, says D'Costa, is that

Oakes argues for Balthasar's solution for the descent into hell in relation to non-Christians, for it allows Christ to "bestow grace eschatologically on whom he will" (2007, 188); which means that all non-Christians might be saved.³⁸

Yet D'Costa is unsatisfied with this quasi-universalism position, and he turns next to Alyssa Lyra Pitstick's critical evaluation of Balthasar's theology.³⁹

D'Costa explains that for Pitstick, Balthasar's theology is not a doctrinal development but rather it "corrupts a true doctrine."⁴⁰ She argues that the definitive Catholic teaching maintains that Christ's redeeming work was finished on the cross and that the descent was "Christ's application of the fruit of redemption."⁴¹ D'Costa agrees with Pitstick, stating:

I would conclude that Balthasar's descent into hell teaching is both in danger of contradicting the teachings of the Catholic church, . . . and

³⁴ Ibid., 201-210. D'Costa references, Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Heart of the World* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1979); Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Mysterium Paschale: The Mystery of Easter* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2000); and Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory*, vol. 4 (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988).

³⁵ D'Costa, *Christianity and World Religions*, 202.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid., 206. Also see, Edward T. Oakes, "The Internal Logic of Holy Saturday in the Theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 9, no. 2 (April 2007): 198-199.

³⁸ Ibid., 204.

³⁹ See, Alyssa Lyra Pitstick, *Light in Darkness: Hans Urs von Balthasar and the Catholic Doctrine of Christ's Descent Into Hell* (Grand Rapids, Mich: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co, 2007); and, Alyssa Pitstick, "Development of Doctrine, or Denial? Balthasar's Holy Saturday and Newman's Essay," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 11, no. 2 (April 1, 2009): 129-145.

⁴⁰ D'Costa, *Christianity and World Religions*, 206.

⁴¹ Pitstick, "Development of Doctrine, or Denial?" 132.

in danger of advancing a deeply problematic Christology and trinitarian doctrine of God.⁴²

For if Christ experienced genuine alienation, then he experienced an ontological separation from the Father resulting in “a rupture in the Godhead.”⁴³ Thus D'Costa maintains that Christ descended “in his soul to the limbo of the just and not in this manner to the other regions, although his power and authority are known in all four regions through his descent.”⁴⁴

Finally, D'Costa points out that the early church teaching on the subject “was grounded on a number of biblical texts:

The most important being Luke 16:22 – the parable of Dives and Lazarus at “Abraham’s bosom”; Luke 23:43 – where Jesus on the cross tells the penitent thief that “today you shall be with me in paradise”; Ephesians 4:9 – where Paul says that before Jesus ascended he “also descended first into the lower parts of the earth”; and 1 Peter 3:10-4:6.⁴⁵

He then states that the 1 Peter passage (which speaks of Christ’s proclamation “to the spirits in prison” - 3:19) “is probably the most pivotal,” and then proceeds to give a concise survey of the patristic interpretation of this passage.⁴⁶

He begins with Clement of Alexandria, who argues that because it is the work of Christ to save, his descent into hell occasioned salvation for both the Jew and the non-Jew alike; for “do not the Scriptures show the Lord preached the Gospel to those that perished in the flood?”⁴⁷ D'Costa says that in this way, Clement initiated “a long tradition that includes both Jews and pagans in the limbo of the just.”⁴⁸ Yet he also highlights Clement’s use of the *Shepherd of Hermas*, which teaches that when the apostles and other teachers of the gospel died, they went and preached to those who had “fallen asleep” before them, so that these too might be “made to know the name of the Son of God” and be saved.⁴⁹

Another interpretation D'Costa notes is from Origen, who reads 1 Peter 3:19-20 (and Ezekiel 16:53) as a message of hope. For Origen,

⁴² D'Costa, *Christianity and World Religions*, 209-210.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 209.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 166.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 168.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ Clement of Alexandria, *The Stromata* (6.6), trans. William Wilson, *New Advent*, accessed August 1, 2014, <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/02101.htm>.

⁴⁸ D'Costa, *Christianity and World Religions*, 170.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.* Also see, Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, eds., *The Shepherd of Hermas* (9.16:5-7), trans. F. Crombie, vol. 2 (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing, 1885), accessed April 21, 2016, <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/02013.htm>; Book III, Ch. 16.

God's just punishment of sinners is given "with the prospect of improvement, . . . of which hope Peter himself thus speaks in his first Epistle" concerning those destroyed in the flood.⁵⁰ Nevertheless, D'Costa is careful to point out that "in his response to Celsus (*Against Celsus* 2.43), Origen says Christ converted only those 'who were suitable and were willing to hear him' (30), which runs counter to any easy universalism."⁵¹ He also mentions Cyril of Alexandria and John Damascene as examples of those in the Greek church who maintained Origen's interpretation of the 1 Peter passage – "although John is very clear that Christ saves only the righteous who deserve salvation."⁵² Finally, he looks to Augustine in the Latin tradition who specifies that there is no second-chance option after death.⁵³

In light of the Fathers' use of the teaching of Christ's descent into hell to explain the salvation of Jews who died before the incarnation, and the tradition which includes righteous non-Jews with righteous Jews in the limbo of the just, D'Costa writes, "Can we analogically argue that the limbo of the just must conceptually exist in relation to non-Christians like Jane who are in a similar situation to the pre-Christian just? . . . The answer I think is a yes and a no."⁵⁴

As regards this yes and no answer, D'Costa explains that one obstacle to an easy comparison is the understanding that after his resurrection Christ emptied the limbo of the just, and "if the limbo of the just is empty, . . . then the analogy breaks down."⁵⁵ Yet he proposes a solution to this dilemma. Referring to the repentant thief on the cross in Luke 23:40-43 (sometimes called Dismas), he observes that "most of the fathers" say that after his death Dismas is located in "the limbo of the just [i.e., paradise], not in heaven (for no one could enter until Christ's resurrection)."⁵⁶ And because Dismas was both a recent convert and a recent thief, we might assume he was not ready for the beatific vision when Christ opened the doors of heaven. In this case, Dismas represents those who may "still require 'time' to mature into the new life of faith that they had begun."⁵⁷ D'Costa concludes that even though Christ emptied the limbo of the just and opened the doors of heaven after his resurrection, this does not necessarily mean everyone was prepared to experience the Blessed Trinity at that time.

⁵⁰ Origen, *Ante-Nicene Fathers: De Principiis* (2.5), ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, trans. Frederick Crombie, vol. 4 (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing, 1885), accessed April 21, 2016, <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/04122.htm>.

⁵¹ D'Costa, *Christianity and World Religions*, 172.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 172-173.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 174.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 176.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 177.

He states, "I am not arguing that Christ is unable to transform the individual instantaneously. Rather, from the human point of view, if one inhabitant of the limbo of the just, Dismas for example, might still require purification, why not others?"⁵⁸

Another objection D'Costa addresses is in regard to the special status of Israel as a covenant people. He asserts that while other religions are in no way comparable to "the *sui generis* nature of Judaism, both after and before the time of Christ," the analogy may yet lie in the fact that Christ's descent completes what is lacking for those who were on their way to salvation before their death.⁵⁹ Hence, "if the righteous Jew is not said to 'convert,' but rather to come to fulfillment, it is fair to conclude that this is also possibly true, with a very different sense of fulfillment, in the case of the righteous pagan."⁶⁰ That is to say, as Christ's descent into the limbo of the just explains how those who were ontologically related to God before death became epistemologically related to Christ after death, perhaps a qualified application of this teaching will also support a similar explanation for the salvation of good non-Christians since the time of Christ's ascension.

With this brief description we find that the chief elements of D'Costa's theory are: 1) the Roman Catholic Church's affirmation that a non-Christian can be saved; 2) an emphasis of Christ's descent into hell in relation to the limbo of the just; 3) the patristic inclusion of good non-Jews with those who benefited from Christ's descent into hell; and 4) the notion that Christ's descent not only emptied the limbo of the just but also opened the doors of purgatory for those in need of further transformation.

Reassessing Tan's Assessment

In the initial development of his theology of religions D'Costa followed Karl Rahner's version of inclusivism, which views other religions as provisional salvific structures by which non-Christians can be saved.⁶¹ D'Costa no longer holds this view. One important reason for this change is that "the *fides ex auditu* is missing from Rahner's position."⁶² So although he maintains that non-Christians can be ontologically united to Christ through their positive responses to elements (not structures) of grace and the activity of the Spirit, he

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 174.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 174-175.

⁶¹ See, Gavin D'Costa, *Theology and Religious Pluralism: The Challenge of Other Religions*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986).

⁶² D'Costa, *Christianity and World Religions*, 19.

also argues that outside hearing the gospel with faith these elements are insufficient for salvation.⁶³ As Wouter Biesbrouck explains:

Whereas for Rahner, it seems that this causal and ontological link with God/Christ is sufficient for the salvation of the non-Christian, it is not so for D'Costa. . . . The implication is that non-Christians, who are linked to Christ in an ontological way, must also be confronted with Christ epistemologically in one way or another.⁶⁴

Nevertheless, Tan surveys a broad spectrum of D'Costa's work in the theology of religions and, as noted earlier, insists that a critical theological shift occurs within his main statements on the subject in regard to the universal salvific will of God and the notion of universal salvific grace.⁶⁵

Grace, Righteousness, and the Good Non-Christian

Tan begins by noting D'Costa's confirmation of the universality of God's salvific will in one of his early works, *Theology and Religious Pluralism*,⁶⁶ and then compares it to a later work, stating:

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." . . . 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.⁶⁷

To demonstrate this trajectory, Tan turns to D'Costa's next monograph, *The Meeting of Religions and the Trinity*,⁶⁸ in which the "underlying assumption of *a priori* grace remains" and where, Tan says, "the categories of natural and supernatural grace were collapsed such that all grace is viewed as salvific and universal."⁶⁹ Indeed, perhaps the most telling example of this seeming 'collapse' of grace

⁶³ Ibid, 19-25, 37.

⁶⁴ Wouter Biesbrouck, "Extra Ecclesiam Nulla Salus, Sed Extra Mundum Nulla Damnatio: Reappropriating Christ's Descent into Hell for Theology of Religions," *Louvain Studies* 37 (2013): 126.

⁶⁵ The former refers to God's desire that all be saved even though not all will be saved, the latter refers to the notion that the possibility of salvation is available to all even though not all will be saved. Tan argues that only the former has biblical support. See, Tan, "Gavin D'Costa's Trinitarian," 101-102.

⁶⁶ D'Costa, *Theology and Religious Pluralism*, 18.

⁶⁷ Tan, "Gavin D'Costa's Trinitarian," 14; quote from, D'Costa, "Towards a Trinitarian Theology of Religions," in *A Universal Faith?*, eds. C. Cornille and V. Necke-brouck (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 1991), 140.

⁶⁸ Gavin D'Costa, *The Meeting of Religions and the Trinity* (Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books, 2000).

⁶⁹ Tan, "Gavin D'Costa's Trinitarian," 15.

is when D'Costa suggests that it is possible for one to hold that other religions are not salvific *per se*, “while holding at the same time, without contradiction, that supernatural saving grace is operative in other religions and that in those other religions there is much that is true, good, and holy.”⁷⁰ It is one thing to claim that grace is present in other religions, but another thing altogether to call this grace ‘saving.’ Tan concludes:

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 theo-logically 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.⁷¹

This is an interesting argument. Tan claims that while D'Costa has rejected Rahner's notion of implicit saving faith, he has nonetheless replaced it with a notion of equivalent consequence – implicit saving grace.

To support his assertion, Tan highlights D'Costa's analogical use of the limbo of the just for explaining the salvation of non-Christians. He writes:

Placing the non-Christian in the limbo of the just suggests the non-Christian occupies a theological position analogous to the OT Fathers, which contravenes his own assertion of a *sui generis* Judaism-Christianity connection.⁷²

His argument is that D'Costa's utilization of Christ's descent into limbo for satisfying the *fides ex auditu* principle obscures a crucial difference between the Old Testament righteous and the good non-Christian. That is, the righteous Old Testament figures were not in limbo merely because they responded positively to elements of grace outside the covenant, but “because they had *already* exhibited *fides* through the hearing of God's Word proclaimed by the OT prophets.”⁷³ Thus, Tan argues that D'Costa's construal of Jane “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

⁷⁰ D'Costa, *The Meeting of Religions and the Trinity*, 105.

⁷¹ Tan, “Gavin D'Costa's Trinitarian,” 104.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 102-103.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 103; emphasis original.

preserve a singular Judaism-Christianity relationship.”⁷⁴ To be fair, D'Costa claims that his analogous application does not have in view “the reality of the covenant embedded within Israel, which is not embedded in other religions,” but rather “the righteousness that might be present within Israel and other religions.”⁷⁵ Yet Tan's concern remains valid to the extent that the qualifications for ‘righteousness’ – and thus entrance into the limbo of the just – includes Old Testament figures having been the particular recipients of the messianic promise. So while D'Costa's analogy hinges on the notion of Old Testament righteousness, this ‘righteousness’ was still contingent upon an act of believing God's proclaimed word.

The point here is not that the Old Testament figures knew the person of Jesus before his descent, but that like Abraham (and the analogy concerns ‘the bosom of Abraham’) they possessed an explicit faith in the promise of a Savior. And when we look to Abraham as the exemplar of faith, we find that instead of being something that is added to an already existing righteousness, the explicit act of faith itself signifies the beginning of righteousness (Gen 15:6; Rom 4:3). This is not to deny God's gracious work among non-Christians through the Spirit's activity or to say that a non-Christian cannot be deemed ‘good,’ ‘just,’ or even ‘righteous’ simply because they lack Christian faith. Rather, it is to say that perhaps further argument is needed before the analogical doors of the limbo of the just can be opened to non-Christians.

D'Costa seems to hold two conflicting claims. He says that “in keeping with Vatican II” other religions are not salvific structures but do contain elements of grace which serve as preparation for the gospel,⁷⁶ and yet he also argues that the Vatican II position “admits the *saving activity* of the ‘Spirit’ being present within elements of other religions, mixed with error and superstition, but which nevertheless indicates the presence of *supernatural saving grace*.”⁷⁷ So it is not at all clear whether he views this grace as preparatory or saving. To be sure, D'Costa stops short of claiming that a non-Christian can die in a state of justification, but he nonetheless argues that the good non-Christian (e.g., Jane) has an ontological relation with Christ through ‘saving’ grace.⁷⁸ Yet what remains uncertain is the exact nature of Jane's ontological relation to Christ. Presumably it is a state of grace, but how is this particular work of

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ D'Costa, *Christianity and World Religions*, 175.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 189.

⁷⁷ Gavin D'Costa, “Traditions and Reception: Interpreting Vatican II's ‘Declaration on the Church's Relation to Non-Christian Religions’,” *New Blackfriars* 92, no. 1040 (July 2011): 500; emphasis added.

⁷⁸ D'Costa, *Christianity and World Religions*, 186-187; 190-191.

grace deemed 'supernatural' and 'saving' when it occurs outside the church's proclamation of the gospel of Christ?

Because of this confusion, I propose that D'Costa's theory would greatly benefit from a more careful explanation of the nature and purpose of these 'elements of grace' in other religions. For as he himself affirms, "Based purely on tracing the contours of what scripture permits us to say: *as far as we know* the conditions of salvation require *solus Christus, fides ex auditu*, and *extra ecclesiam nulla salus*."⁷⁹ To this purpose, we will turn to consider some theological delineations of grace.

Defining Grace

Let us review. Jane, who is a Buddhist, responds positively to the good and beautiful elements in her religion and is thereby on her way to salvation. She is not 'saved' insofar as her response is not yet secured by faith, but she is nonetheless ontologically related to Christ through her positive response. In death, she will receive faith through the hearing of the gospel and this prospective *fides ex auditu* solution is countenanced largely through an analogical application of Christ's descent into the limbo of the just and the doctrine of purgatory. Yet our noted concerns revolve around one main issue – the nature and work of grace in Jane's life before her death. For if these elements are actual manifestations of 'supernatural saving grace,' then, as Tan asserts, grace becomes a theological concept disconnected from the saving work of Christ and the Spirit. Thus the difficulty lies with D'Costa's use of the terms 'saving' and 'supernatural' for describing this universal grace, and a more precise explanation of the nature and function of this grace is needed to satisfy Tan's concern.

Considering 'Natural' and 'Supernatural' Grace

Recall Tan's accusation that D'Costa collapses natural and supernatural grace within the notion of God's universal salvific will, and that because of this collapse his theory lacks "a clear economic connection between grace with the operations of the Spirit and Christ."⁸⁰ To address this issue we must first consider the Roman Catholic theological environment in which D'Costa cultivates his theory. For instance, in regard to the delineations of grace, Ludwig Ott explains that in its "wider sense" natural grace refers to "the Creation and gifts

⁷⁹ Ibid., 23; emphasis original.

⁸⁰ Tan, "Gavin D'Costa's Trinitarian," 15.

of the natural order, such as bodily health and mental soundness.”⁸¹ Yet Catholic theology also teaches that a person, by nature, is able to “perform good works without help of Divine grace, by his natural powers alone” and “can know God by the sole light of reason” (albeit in a limited way mixed with error).⁸² Nevertheless, because of “the ‘wound of ignorance’ . . . caused by the Fall” no one is saved by natural grace alone. So even though a person can know something about God and can do good works through ‘the sole light of reason’ and by their own ‘natural powers,’ this ‘natural’ achievement is not itself saving grace nor does it constitute a preparation for grace *per se*. As Ott states, “A natural positive disposition for grace is not possible, since between nature and grace there is no inner proportion.”⁸³

In other words, if a person has a positive disposition for saving grace, this is due solely to a ‘supernatural’ work of God “which intrinsically moves the soul, that is, actual grace by way of preparation for the reception of sanctifying grace.”⁸⁴ Hence, the issue for D’Costa and other Catholic theologians is in how to explain “the way in which the salvific grace of God – which is always given by means of Christ in the Spirit and has a mysterious relationship to the church – comes to individual non-Christians.”⁸⁵ How does a person who only has access to natural grace receive supernatural preparation for and the attainment of saving grace?

D’Costa’s proposal is that the Vatican II position appears to expand the traditional understanding of *preparatio evangelica* so that what was once viewed as strictly ‘natural’ elements might now be understood in supernatural terms.⁸⁶ As noted above, D’Costa does not suggest that other religions are alternative ways of salvation, but that perhaps good and true elements within them function as supernatural means by which an unevangelized person can become ontologically related to Christ.⁸⁷ Yet it is this very point to which Tan objects, saying that without this distinction between natural and supernatural grace, the categories of grace are “collapsed such that all grace is viewed as salvific and universal.”⁸⁸ But a closer reading may show that D’Costa has a rather different interpretation in mind.

⁸¹ Ludwig Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, ed. James Canon Bastible, trans. Patrick Lynch (Charlotte, NC: TAN Books, 1974), 220.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 234-235.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 237.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 238.

⁸⁵ D’Costa, *Christianity and World Religions*, 210.

⁸⁶ See especially, D’Costa, *Vatican II*, 99-105.

⁸⁷ For example, see, D’Costa, *The Meeting of Religions and the Trinity*, 101-109.

⁸⁸ Tan, “Gavin D’Costa’s Trinitarian,” 15; emphasis original.

Grace: A Work of the Holy Spirit

Tan uses a partial quote from *The Meeting of Religions* to support his claim that D'Costa's theory collapses the categories of grace, which states, "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.'"⁸⁹ But the context of this statement is D'Costa's summation of two writings by Pope John Paul II regarding the Council's position on other religions.⁹⁰ In short, the Pope emphasizes the *preparatio evangelica* while also affirming the Holy Spirit's work through that which is good and true in the world. For example, in *Redemptoris Missio* he states, "Whatever the Spirit brings about in human hearts and in the history of peoples, in cultures and religions serves as a preparation for the Gospel and can only be understood in reference to Christ."⁹¹ D'Costa's conclusion, then, is that based on the statements by Pope John Paul II and the Council, even though other religions do not serve as salvific structures,

it is also clear that the grace encountered in non-Christian religions is viewed as a *preparatio evangelica*, though *not* in terms of a division between the grace of creation and the grace of salvation, or of natural and supernatural grace, but only because within the historical church is this grace finally properly ordered toward its eschatological fulfillment. Therefore, this grace is "not an alternative to Christ."⁹²

His point is that 'this grace' does not fit into the simple division of natural and supernatural grace *per se*. For this grace is like natural grace in that it occurs outside the church's proclamation of the gospel and is on its own insufficient for salvation. Yet it is also like supernatural grace in that it is a work of the Holy Spirit to prepare a person for the gospel. Thus we find that rather than a collapse of categories, D'Costa's theory seeks to address the need for defining how the Spirit draws individuals outside the church towards an eschatological salvation in Christ. As he asserts in *CWR*, his solution

allows for the real variety of religious ends in the world's religions, while still recognizing that within these differences there may be sufficient elements of *preparatio evangelica* that allow God's grace to work toward the final salvation of such persons.⁹³

⁸⁹ Ibid., 15; quoting, D'Costa, *The Meeting of Religions and the Trinity*, 108-109.

⁹⁰ John Paul II, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1994); John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio*, Vatican, 1990, accessed October 25, 2016, http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_07121990_redemptoris-missio.html.

⁹¹ John Paul II, "Redemptoris Missio," 29.

⁹² D'Costa, *The Meeting of Religions and the Trinity*, 108-109; quoting, John Paul II, "Redemptoris Missio," 29.

⁹³ D'Costa, *Christianity and World Religions*, 211.

If we recall the example of Jane, then the idea here is that Jane is not merely responding to “the light of her conscience” and to “the good, true, and beautiful . . . found in positive elements within her religion,” but in doing so she “is acting in response to the promptings of the Holy Spirit.”⁹⁴

Still, until this type of grace is labeled and better defined, Tan's objection remains valid. For if, as D'Costa rightly claims, the true and good elements by which this grace is mediated are insufficient for salvation, then calling this grace ‘saving’ and ‘supernatural’ only confuses the point. Although, we should also note that Tan's position suffers from a version of terminological confusion as well, because Protestant theology, especially in the Reformed tradition, does not often distinguish grace as ‘natural’ and ‘supernatural.’ Unlike the Catholic view, Protestant theology holds that by nature a person cannot reason their way towards God nor perform morally good acts. As Reformed theologian Herman Bavinck explains, “Nothing good remained in fallen man; all his thoughts, words, and deeds were polluted by sin.”⁹⁵ Therefore the existence of the good, true, and beautiful in the world is not due to nature, but to divine intervention.⁹⁶ And in this way, the distinction is usually expressed as ‘common grace’ and ‘special grace,’ where only the former is universal and only the latter is saving.⁹⁷

Nevertheless, from this perspective we see that both common grace and special grace are, in a technical sense, forms of supernatural grace, as both constitute a work of divine intervention. Which means that the equivalent Protestant need to D'Costa's Catholic proposal is to seek a conceptual category and definition for a kind of grace that is not merely common grace or special grace, but that nonetheless constitutes a ‘preparing’ work of the Spirit for orienting an unevangelized person towards the attainment of salvation at a future time. And to this purpose, we may find that the solution for both the Catholic and Protestant dilemma is close at hand.

A Partial Resolution

We noted earlier that Ott defines the kind of grace that prepares a person for receiving sanctifying grace as “actual grace.”⁹⁸ He goes

⁹⁴ Ibid., 162.

⁹⁵ Herman Bavinck, “Common Grace,” trans. Raymond Van Leeuwen, *Calvin Theological Journal* 24, no. 1 (Ap 1989): 50.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 51.

⁹⁷ See, Richard A. Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms: Drawn Principally from Protestant Scholastic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2006), 130, 131.

⁹⁸ Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, 222.

on to explain that this aspect of grace (also called “assisting” or “helping” grace) “is a temporary supernatural intervention by God by which the powers of the soul are stirred up to perform a salutary act which is directed to the attaining or preservation or increase of sanctifying grace.”⁹⁹ For our purposes here, the important point about this theological sense of grace is that although it is a temporary divine act and therefore insufficient for salvation, it is nonetheless a *divine act* towards the attainment of salvation.

So, in the case of Jane, we might say that the Holy Spirit's work of actual grace enables her positive response to the good, true, and beautiful thereby directing her *towards the attaining of saving grace* at a future time. And the emphasis here is not so much on the existence of ‘elements of grace’ in other religions, but on the preparatory work of the Spirit in the world through elements of ‘natural’ or ‘common’ grace. Moreover, in light of Tan's objections, this application has the added benefit of maintaining the theological connection between the concept of ‘universal salvific grace’ and the two economic Persons.¹⁰⁰ For the nature of actual grace is ‘salvific’ to the extent that it is a work of the Spirit leading people to Christ. In other words, although the proposal is that this grace is universally accessible, it also holds that this grace is efficacious only for certain individuals and functions only as a preparation – a position that provides substantial “theological territory” for both Catholics and Protestants to distinguish the universal salvific will of God.¹⁰¹

For instance, in his latest book *Vatican II: Catholic Doctrines on Jews and Muslims*, D'Costa writes:

The positive elements within the religions orient (*ordinantur*) all men and women towards the gospel. All these non-Christian religions ... belong to the ‘People of God’ in potentiality, for God desires the salvation of all and Christ is the head of all men and women. ... This potentiality is actualized on earth through supernatural faith in Christ and baptism. How it is actualized after death is another matter.¹⁰²

Of course, we know from *CWR* what his proposal is for explaining how faith is actualized after death. The problem with this statement here, however, is that if these elements orient *all* men and women towards the gospel (based on God's universal salvific will), then it becomes difficult for D'Costa to explain how his position differs from the quasi-universalism of Balthasar and Oakes. Yet, if interpreted through the lens of ‘actual grace,’ he could say that the Spirit's work through these elements orients all people towards the gospel in two

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ See, Tan, “Gavin D'Costa's Trinitarian,” 101-102.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² D'Costa, *Vatican II*, 99.

ways: those who respond positively are, by grace, being prepared to receive faith when they hear the gospel, while those who respond negatively to this grace are thereby preparing themselves to reject the gospel. Hence, this work of actual grace orients all people towards the gospel, but not all are thereby oriented towards salvation.

As regards the Protestant context, perhaps the application would focus less on a person's response to certain 'elements' and more on the enabling work of the Spirit. For instance, within the Reformed tradition the affirmation of the possibility of salvation for a non-Christian hinges not on the notion of a 'good' person, but rather on the idea of divine election. As the Westminster Confession states:

Elect infants, dying in infancy, are regenerated, and saved by Christ, through the Spirit, who works when, and where, and how he pleases: so also are all other elect persons who are incapable of being outwardly called by the ministry of the Word.¹⁰³

Thus, at least in the case of an adult, the concept of actual grace might help explain how the Spirit – 'who works when, and where, and how he pleases' – prepares an 'elect' unevangelized person for a future hearing and reception of the gospel. For Scripture teaches that salvation in Christ, even for the unevangelized elect, is by grace through faith alone and faith comes only from hearing the preaching of the gospel.¹⁰⁴

The point is, even though Catholics and Protestants have different theological maps, perhaps the concept of 'actual grace' can serve as a kind of standard theological compass to guide the conversation towards a mutual destination; i.e., towards a common Christian witness on the issue. To be sure, this proposal offers only a partial resolution to Tan's assessment. Still left unresolved is his argument that D'Costa's analogous use of the limbo of the just falls short of explaining the salvation of non-Christians, since its theological purpose is to explain the salvation of Old Testament figures who had exhibited explicit faith before death. Nevertheless, D'Costa is right to seek a way forward in the discussion by reference to the teachings of Christ's descent into hell. Indeed, Oakes (Catholic) and Biesbrouck (Protestant) both recommend solutions that focus on the nature of the intermediate state after the time of Christ's descent and resurrection.¹⁰⁵ In light of such efforts, the hope is that this article will aid

¹⁰³ "Westminster Confession of Faith," *Center for Reformed Theology and Apologetics*, A.10.3, accessed August 28, 2014, http://www.reformed.org/documents/wcf_with_proofs/index.html.

¹⁰⁴ This statement reflects Romans 10:17 and the five *solae* of Protestantism – *sola Scriptura*, *sola fide*, *sola gratia*, *solus Christus*, and *soli Deo gloria*.

¹⁰⁵ See, Edward T. Oakes, "Descensus and Development: A Response to Recent Rejoinders," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 13, no. 1 (January 2011): 19-23; Biesbrouck, "Extra Ecclesiam," 132.

the ecumenical discussion by providing a concordant understanding of how God, by grace, might prepare an unevangelized person for a prospective encounter with the church's proclamation of the gospel and the reality of Christ.

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