

Diploma Thesis:

**CONTEMPORARY APPROACHES TO SALVATION:
DAVID FORD, DAVID HART AND ALOYSIUS PIERIS**

Jozef Murín
Praha 2012

Report from:

Rev DR Michael Kirwan SJ
Heythrop College (University of London)
0044 208 675 4710
m.kirwan@heythrop.ac.uk

7th June 2012

The thesis has a very fine structure, according to which three contemporary theologians are explored in terms of David Tracy's typology of the theologian and his/her 'publics'. Thus, Aloys Pieris represents the practical theologian whose focus is on human and social conversion, and whose primary addressee is a society being summoned to transformation; David Ford is a fundamental theologian, seeking to engage the academy in terms that make the gospel comprehensible to a philosophically-attuned audience; and David Hart, whose aesthetic theology is described here as 'faith seeking beauty', is aligned with Tracy's category of the 'systematic theologian' at the service of the believing community. Also deployed is Tracy's understanding of theology as 'mutually critical correlation', an intentional dialogue between the facts of tradition and the facts of lived experience.

Tracy's model is aimed at the preservation of legitimate theological 'pluralism without relativism'. It lends itself here to an interesting comparative study of theologians from three different traditions, as well as three 'styles': Catholic, Anglican and Orthodox. The candidate gives further shape to his study by framing it in the context of soteriology, that area of doctrine which he describes as 'the centre and focal point of Christian self-identity'. Two dimensions of the soteriological analysis are then explored: firstly, the understanding (expounded in Gunton, McIntyre and O'Collins) that soteriological understanding consists in a response to key metaphors or images which have persisted over time; secondly, that there is an inherent and symbiotic relation between Christology- the doctrine of who Christ is- and soteriology- the doctrine of what Christ has achieved for us. To reduce one of the poles to the other is to distort and reduce the Christian message.

From this 'preparation' of the theological landscape, the candidate proceeds to a consideration of the three authors. Aloys Pieris, arguing for a specifically Asian Christology, by which he means one marked by poverty and by pluriform religiosity, demonstrates the call for 'plurality without relativism' which is the main drive of this thesis. An authentic Asian Christology will be worked out with other traditions such as Buddhism, in a way that is neither syncretic nor synthetic, but a symbiosis of the different traditions. In order to arrive at this symbiosis, however, Pieris has to call for a revision of the traditional Christological formulae of Nicaea and Chalcedon.

David Ford draws on Ricoeur, Jungel and above all Emmanuel Levinas in his 'journey of intensification', according to which Levinas' ethical phenomenology of the face is a fruitful metaphor for a contemporary 'soteriology of abundance'. As accords with Ford's Barthian background the approach is strongly Christocentric; the candidate asks, therefore, how effectively such an approach can overcome the exclusion and achieve the pluralist openness demonstrated by Pieris.

David Bentley Hunt, an Orthodox theologian based in the US, is presented as enabling dialogue between church fathers and the main figures of contemporary postmodern philosophy. The point of contention is whether Christianity avoids being an ‘ontology of violence’; Hunt argues in *The Beauty of Creation* and other works for a perichoretic order of creation, in the course of which he challenges the early Girard on the nature of sacrifice, as well as twentieth century ‘theologians of tragedy’ who have argued for a suffering God.

The final section weaves together some thoughts on soteriology from the three authors, according to the criteria set out at the beginning of Ford’s book *Self and Salvation*. The candidate’s own constructive proposals are put forward as a striving to avoid iconoclasm and idolatry. Despite the extraordinary symmetry of the overall structure of this theses, the candidate wisely concedes that there seems to be something about soteriology that ‘resists systematization’.

STRENGTHS

This is a well-written, beautifully organized dissertation, with a largely successful attempt to bring theologians from three different traditions into a ‘perichoretic’ engagement. The reading of these theologians in terms of Tracy’s publics is well done. It demonstrates a high degree of theological confidence and maturity on the part of the candidate, as well as a generous open-spiritedness to ‘pluralism without relativism’, whether this is expressed ecumenically, or as interreligious dialogue, or more simply in terms of theological method. Very different authors and points of view are presented fairly, but with elements of appropriate critique. The candidate is to be congratulated for his readiness to take on this extensive and challenging study, and though I record below some of the limitations of this, they should not obscure the considerable achievement of this fine dissertation.

LIMITATIONS

The downside of the organization and ambition of this work is (at times) a tendency to overschematise (though as we have seen, the candidate does acknowledge at the end that the mystery being described resists all our systems!). While the mapping of the three theologians onto Tracy’s template is certainly illuminating and effective, it can also work as a straightjacket. Thus, Pieris is *not just* working as a ‘public’ theologian, nor Ford as a ‘fundamental’ theologian, nor Hunt as a ‘systematic’. The consideration of three theologians is very effective (and essential, in fact, to the structure of the dissertation), but it does mean that there is not a lot of critique for each one; possible objections are mentioned, rather than dealt with in any depth. I consider below lines of questioning to be put to Ford Pieris in particular, as well as a more general question about the very possibility of doing soteriology in the current age.

FURTHER QUESTIONS

I would suggest the following areas for further development and questioning:

- The candidate has set out very well the landscape of contemporary discussion on soteriology, and is clearly on top of all this material. What may be worth asking about I whether under ‘postmodern’ conditions it is possible any longer to construct a single, unitary account of salvation? Previous soteriologies have always depended on a felt need for being saved, by large numbers of people. We seem now to be in an era where this widespread felt need has largely disappeared, and certainly any attempt to construct a soteriology in the classical sense would be mistrusted as a ‘grand narrative’. How would the candidate respond to the view that our current crisis goes beyond simply finding new, up-to-date metaphors, but is in fact a more deep-rooted crisis of this very kind of discourse?

- It would be fruitful to question the candidate further about the individual theologians whom he has chosen, and invite him to press forward with the elements of critique which are in the thesis, but which could be developed further. For example, how would Ford handle the objection that his phenomenology of 'facing' might be exclusionary when it comes to interreligious dialogue?
- Perhaps more interestingly, I would propose talking further about Aloys Pieris' argument that we need to go 'beyond' or 'behind' the classical Christological formulations of Nicaea and Chalcedon; these are not adequate, he claims, certainly not to the task of articulating an Asian Christology (Pieris describes them as 'jejune'). In fact Edward Schillebeeckx argued for a similar strategy in his book *Jesus: an Experiment in Christology*, and this move is implicit in other liberation theologians. Such a move is controversial; how does the candidate view this kind of approach? Are the classical developments in Christology a help or a hindrance to the task of constructing a soteriology? For example, is Pieris' objection to Nicaea and Chalcedon's still valid if we think of these councils as a kind of negative theology, or doctrinal grammar (Lindbeck) rather than presenting us with positive content as to how we should think of Christ?

Dr Michael KIRWAN