CHRISTIANITY AND THE RELIGIONS:
FROM CONFRONTATION TO DIALOGUE

By Jacques Dupuis, S.J.
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Reviewed by Ruben C. Mendoza

In a multi-cultural and multi-religious context, how can Christians make sense of and understand the reality of religious pluralism? In what way can they evaluate other religious traditions and how are they to relate to them in a way that is truly open and at the same time, faithful to their Christian tradition? Is religious pluralism to be accepted de facto or in principle? These are the basic questions which Jesuit Jacques Dupuis persuasively and convincingly answers in his most recent book on religious pluralism, Christianity and the Religions: From Confrontation to Dialogue.

In asking what role the different religions have in the one design of God for humankind, Dupuis shows how the Christian faith can be true to its identity while at the same time, be genuinely open to and appreciative of other religions. All throughout the book he manifests great sensitivity to other religions in interpreting the teachings of the Church and in presenting a contemporary theology of religions. He approaches the matter “convinced that a broader approach and a more positive attitude, provided that they be theologically well grounded, will help us discover, to our surprise, new breadths and new depths in the Christian message” (259). For him, a “qualitative leap” is needed in order for the Church to retain its credibility or to grow in it as it openly seeks God’s ways beyond the confines of the Christian tradition. He notes that there is a need both to purify theological language with regard to other religions and at the same time, to purify the memories of these religions with Christianity and vice-versa, since these relationships are many times marked by suspicion, animosity and even violence.
Dupuis' book is a development and clarification of the ideas that he presented in his earlier work, *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism* (Orbis Books, 1997) [Review: *Landas* 12:2 (1998), 120-123]. He develops his own "Trinitarian and pneumatic Christology" which he calls "inclusive pluralism" or "pluralistic inclusivism," a combination of inclusive Christocentrism with theocentric pluralism. He proposes an open theology of religions by developing his theology of the "two hands of God," (St. Irenaeus), the Son and the Holy Spirit, highlighting the universal and salvific activity and presence of the Word and the Spirit before and after the Incarnation.

On "one hand," Dupuis argues that the Word of God, present in history before its Incarnation, is not to be confined with the Word Incarnate, Jesus Christ, precisely because the humanity of Jesus cannot exhaust the Divine Mystery. He emphasizes the universality of that Word revealed by God and which God continues to reveal not only to the Judaeo-Christian tradition but also to peoples of other faiths in their own traditions. Dupuis is careful to note though that the revelation in other faiths does not mean that something is lacking in Jesus' revelation and also that what this revelation in other religions may do is to highlight aspects of God, not equally emphasized in the Christian tradition. And, on the "other hand," the Spirit who is the point of entry of God into the human person is present not only in the religious lives of the peoples of other religions but is present in those religions as well. The Spirit who anticipates the Christ event is also present in the world before and after this event, vivifying all things and enabling peoples to respond to God's initiatives in the human heart, including those who are outside the Church.

Against the pluralists (e.g. John Hick and Paul Knitter) Dupuis affirms the constitutive uniqueness of, the salvific universality of, and the fullness of revelation in Jesus Christ. Differing from those who approach and present the faith in a dogmatic manner, characterized by insensitivity and exclusivity, Dupuis gives these Christian tenets a fresh and creative interpretation, which actually
leads him to claim that there is “mutual asymmetrical complementarity” between the Christian faith and other religious faiths. For him, “an exchange and a sharing of values, a dynamic interaction, can take place between Christianity and other traditions, such that it can result to mutual enrichment” (257). The acknowledgement of “truth and grace” in other religions does not cancel out the fullness of God’s revelation in Jesus Christ. Other religions find the fullness of their meaning in the Christ event “without being absorbed or dispossessed” (257) by it. The various religions then represent various paths to a common goal, that is, a sharing in the divine life of God. The religions themselves through the Word and Spirit universally present and active in the world are the very means by which their adherents experience the mystery of salvation in Jesus Christ.

Dupuis highlights the elements of the Christian Bible, often interpreted as condemning of other religions, that actually show openness to and a positive regard for them. For him, one should refrain from interpreting the Bible in an exclusive fashion. God, who desires the salvation of all (1 Tim 2:4) and who shows no partiality (Dt 10:17; Rom 2:11), has established a covenant with all peoples and invites them to share in God’s Reign. The Church as the sacrament of the Reign is where “we find the visible manifestation of the project that God is silently carrying out throughout the world … the maximum concentration of the Father’s activity” (214). Because of grace present in the world, all peoples are oriented to the Church as the privileged locus of the Spirit and they too mediate the Reign although in a different way.

For Dupuis, the point of departure for a theology of religions is the practice of interreligious dialogue. Dialogue is based on the foundation that all peoples share in the same origin and destiny in God, the universal mediation of Jesus, the universal presence of the Spirit, and the universality of God’s Reign. And since all peoples are in communion in the mystery of salvation, in interreligious prayer prepared with great sensitivity and respect for each other, we find
“the deepest expression of dialogue and at the same time the guarantee of a deeper common conversion of the partners to God and to the others” (252). In prayer, we can then perhaps wonder at the very “immensity of a God who is Love and communication” (255), the very basis of religious pluralism in principle.

Dupuis in this book performs a great service for Christians who are confronted with the question of religious pluralism and who truly want to understand it. Although argued clearly and written for a general audience, the average lay person will be challenged in following the arguments of Dupuis. What he does is to open and widen the horizons for interpreting other religions, seeing God’s presence in them. He lays a theological foundation for dialogue which is faithful to the Christian identity and at the same time, open to God’s ways in other religions. His book is thus a valuable contribution to the on-going discourse in the theology of religions.

This book will be particularly useful for Christians who live in multi-religious situations and who are honestly confronting their personal questions with regard to other faiths. The “pointers” which Dupuis has given will prove valuable as the Church engages peoples of other faiths in dialogue. In a world where even Christianity has been used as a means of discrimination and violence against those who claim salvation exclusively for Christians, Dupuis’ retrieval of and emphasis on the positive elements of the Christian tradition regarding other faiths opens the way for a more fruitful dialogue with others. What underlies Dupuis’ theology is his deep conviction of the grandeur and incomprehensible depth of God’s efforts in reaching out to humankind. If only we can truly listen to others in dialogue, then, perhaps, we will be graced by our discovery of and encounter with God in them. We may then be surprised that God is all along waiting for us in other religions.