

Christianity Among Other Religions Book Review

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Christianity Among Other Religions: Apologetics in a Contemporary Context

By Roch A. Kereszty, O. Cist

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224 pages

I hereby attest that I have read this book in its entirety, have not skimmed, and have applied my best effort to understanding it.

## **I. Introduction**

In *Christianity Among Other Religions*, Kereszty sets out to examine the case and possible approaches to evangelization in a modern pluralistic context. Kereszty's subtitle indicates that he is engaging in an exercise in apologetics; however, as that term is generally understood, it seems appropriate to rather classify this work as one of meta-evangelization of a sort. He seeks to identify the potential harmonies and irreconcilable differences between Catholic Christianity and other major world religions to provide a foundation for the project of evangelization.

In any approach to evangelization there are three groups that must be addressed separately, each appropriate to his own background. For our sake, I shall divide each of the three into two further subdivisions. The first of these groups is evangelization of Catholics, both those within the Church and those who are nominally Catholic yet lack a sufficient understanding of their faith to practice it in meaningful way. In my estimation, these are those to whom Saint Pope John Paul II and Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI were referring when they encouraged a new evangelization. The second subject of evangelization is directed toward Christians not in full union with the Catholic Church. While the tone of the Church's dialogue with these groups has certainly softened and become more nuanced in the last fifty years, the final goal of her dialogue with each of these groups remains a return to the full unity of the Christian Faithful in the visible Church as well as the mystical body; this endeavor can more properly and descriptively called ecumenism. The communities in this section can be divided into two further groups, the

Orthodox and related churches that defined themselves from the schism near the turn of the first millennium and those ecclesial communities that resulted from the Protestant Movement of the early modern period. This last group is the focus on the second half of the course and a later book review. Finally, there are those who are outside the Christian fold entirely. This can be because they have not heard the Gospel, heard it preached in a way that made it impossible or unattractive for them to accept, or outright rejected the Gospel. For the sake of this text, we shall divide this group into those who believe in a deity or higher good in some sort and those who have rejected any notion of religion. Kereszty's book focuses on the former of these groups.

Kereszty does an excellent job of fairly presenting the beliefs of each of the religions he treats in its most positive light. He clearly sets out to find in any human quest for truth, the spark of Divine Truth that exists at the core. This is not only useful for evangelization *ad gentes*, but absolutely necessary. Clearly, if the Church cannot or does not identify and appreciate the truth to be found in other religions, she will never have a language to offer the common starting point from which to accept and purify the truth already in those beliefs. (see AG 11)

## **II. Kereszty on Interreligious Dialogue and Evangelization**

Kereszty identifies two extremes, traps that must be avoided, if genuine dialogue with a view to evangelization is to happen. If the Christian falls into either of these extremes, he is either denying the Truth of the Gospel or he is failing to be a witness who can draw persons to the Gospel; indeed, he risks becoming an obstacle to the experience of Christ in others.

The first trap is the indifferentism that would approach interreligious dialogue as simply an open sharing of ideas, each of which are given equal validity and truth value. This is incompatible with a genuine dialogue and evangelization because it, in a vain attempt to be inoffensive, ignores the Gospel that each Christian has been called to proclaim to the ends of the

earth. As Kereszky notes, the participation of the whole human person in the Gospel requires not only inner participation but an external participation as well. This respects the hylomorphic nature of man; he is both a physical and spiritual being, and both of these aspects of the human person must be a part of his participation. (Kereszky 170) Therefore, it cannot be held that any and all religion, identification of God, and desire for truth and love, are equal conduits to the same God. This would deny the very truth of the incarnation so central to Christianity.

Second, those participating in interreligious dialogue must not approach it in a manner that builds walls instead of bridges with dialogue partners. This sort of trap often manifests as a sort of triumphalism that treats all other religious and cultural traditions as unworthy of serious consideration. Rather, all participants in interreligious dialogue must listen for the truth, even if only in seminal form, that is present in all human religious endeavor. It is the task of the Christian engaging in such dialogue with a view to evangelization to identify and purify the truths that are already present even in those traditions most alien to the Church. (AG 11)

Therefore, as Kereszky rightly identifies in harmony with the universal magisterium's teaching in *Ad Gentes* that those tasked with evangelization, all Christians, must begin that endeavor with genuine dialog. Put another way, in the Christian sense, dialogue and evangelization are inextricably linked. Evangelization without dialogue is impossible; dialogue without evangelization is unbecoming a Christian. (see AG 10-11) Kereszky observes an erroneous starting point that is included in much contemporary interreligious dialogue that stems from this error:

The demand for the recognition of the personal equality of the partners is often confused with the demand to acknowledge the equal value of their respective positions; the open-minded readiness to learn from one's dialogue partners is instinctively equated with relativizing one's own position vis-à-vis that of the dialogue partner. Thus, anyone who dares to represent the absolute and universal claim of his/her religion will most likely incur the charge of cultural imperialism. (143)

Hence, we must, even in the face of the charge of “cultural imperialism,” enter into dialogue and maintain that the Truth of the Gospel is a truth that is not merely on-par with every other truth claim made by man’s religions. Rather, it is the fullness of God’s own revelation to his people.

It is, in fact, impossible to be faithful to the central claim of Christianity, the incarnation, while, at the same time, treating each religion one encounters as an equal, while different due to cultural forces, path to God. Kereszky observes that the intimacy which God desired between himself and man was made possible only through the incarnation. The incarnation is by its nature, “historically contingent and temporally and spatially limited.” (148) If this is the case, for one to claim that God is equally available to each path, one must, in the same breath, deny the incarnation as a unique self-revelation of God. If the incarnation is no longer unique in history, then Christianity is no more than idle gossip with no grounding in truth or history.

These facts require one further question: if Catholics profess to possess such a unique self-revelation of God, how can it, in any meaningful way, be said that Catholics can learn from other religions with a somehow lesser revelation of God. The answer to this comes in two forms. First, it seems valuable to add a distinction that is harmonious with Kereszky’s argument, but not explicitly stated in his text: Catholics can learn from other world religions; in a manner of speaking, however, the Church cannot. If we accept the Catholic belief that the Church contains the fullness of God’s self-revelation, anything to be learned about God can, in some form, be found within the Church. However, God entrusted this self-revelation to finite beings. Hence, any single person within the Church cannot claim a full understanding of that truth. Kereszky points out that, in other world religions, we can frequently find truths that have, in the course of history, been buried such that they are less visible than perhaps they should be in the Catholic Church.

Taken as a whole, therefore, Kereszky's discussion of evangelization *ad gentes* can be summed up in three points. First, effective evangelization and sincere dialogue are inextricable in a properly Christian understanding; he observes that the two are "different although not adequately distinguishable." (141) Second, to relegate dialogue to an assumption of equal truth claims for each dialogue participant is to reject the central Truth of the Christian faith. Finally, while the Catholic Church is perfect in one meaning of the statement, the persons who make up the Church militant can always learn from their dialogue partners truths that are buried in the Faith or that, as fallen man, we have set aside in some way.

### **III. A Significant Section**

In the introduction to part four of *Christianity Among Other Religions*, (141-142) Kereszty sets out ground rules to properly understand interreligious dialogue and evangelization. From a historical perspective, he observes, dialogue has always been a part of the evangelical endeavor, an endeavor that clearly continues according to the contemporary magisterium. (AG 10) Already, in the New Testament itself, Paul observes an altar to an unknown God and announces, based on the truth that the pagan Athenians have, that the unknown God is the God of Israel made incarnate in Jesus Christ. (Acts 17:23) In fact, simply because of the nature of the way humans communicate and interrelate with one another, evangelization is necessarily dialogical.

He goes on to discuss two phases in religious dialogue and evangelization identified by Joseph Ratzinger in *Truth and Tolerance*. The first phase is the logical explanation of Christianity in which the burgeoning Church used the philosophy of the Greeks and the surrounding world to better understand the truths that had been divinely revealed in Jesus Christ. Through this reasoned approach of the early Fathers, according to Ratzinger, the idol-worship of

the surrounding world was overcome. This movement of evangelization is already dialogical in that it uses truths that are not, in themselves, religious statements to point to religious Truth. The second phase that Ratzinger proposes and Kereszty recounts is that which is begun most clearly under Gregory the Great, but can already be seen in seminal form in Paul's preaching at the areopagus. Gregory instructs the Christian missionaries to end the idol worship of the newly-converted, but to take any truth, even truth expressed in formerly pagan rituals, and embrace a purified form of that truth. Hence, in following the example of Paul, and the understanding that truth, to a greater or lesser extent, is found everywhere, the Church undertook the responsibility that, to this day, she embraces to find and purify the seeds Truth in any form in which it is found.

#### **IV. A New Idea**

Kereszty reflects on a passage from Saint Francis Xavier in which he laments that a lack of ministers to preach and baptize in India is causing large numbers of the subcontinent's population to forfeit heaven because they cannot hear the words of the Gospel and be baptized. (165) As the final section of his book draws to a close, he then parallels what a modern version of that cry would sound like. Kereszty points out that, if the Church or the persons in her should reject the missionary activity to which the Church is called, a similar failure to that which is lamented several centuries ago would occur. However, he takes this one step further.

Kereszty invokes the language of the New Testament when baptism and imposition of hands to call down the Holy Spirit upon gentile converts was debated. (Acts 10:47) If Christians either ignore the call to preach Christ to those who are clearly open to God's grace and who are "sensitive to pure love and truth," (179) it would be to deny them Christ himself from whom these impulses of grace originate. At the same time, a modern-day Francis Xavier would identify those who, rather than being open to the movements of Grace in their natural lives, have shut

themselves off from any action of grace through hate, ego, or hardness of heart. To those also, the Gospel must be preached. Christ has given His Church the mandate to preach the Gospel to the ends of the earth. If the Church should stop preaching the Gospel in an attempt to avoid offense or be politically correct, those who fail to preach will surely be held responsible for their souls to some extent. (see 180)

## **V. A Great Quote**

“This experience [of the risen Christ] may not be anything else than the conviction that love is worth any suffering or a longing for the triumph of justice and goodness, a longing which contains within itself a glimmer of hope for its fulfillment.”

In this short statement, Kereszty identifies two truths of the Christian faith that are important to remember when looking for the movements of the Lord in a person’s life. First of all, love, which Christians see as innate of the very nature of God, includes suffering, and that suffering has value; it is no great leap from this understanding to the understanding of redemptive suffering to which all Christians are called in imitation of its perfect exemplar in Christ. Second, a longing for justice, if the notion of justice is purified such that it represents true justice rather than fierce retribution, is a longing that can be easily purified to a longing for God. Such a longing, if it remains a longing rather than descending into despair, expresses a trust that such a triumph is possible; that triumph is ultimately to be seen in God. In short, even such vague and ill-defined claims as consistent love in suffering or a desire for true justice are, at least seminally, graced encounters that can be purified into a knowledge of the True God.

## **VI. Conclusion**

The main bulk of Kereszty’s text has not been treated at length in this review because his individual chapters, while covering necessary understanding of the potential harmonies and



irreconcilable differences between each of the major world religions he treats with Christianity, are mostly pragmatic. Instead, this review has focused on the meta-principles of interreligious dialogue that he covers so that, by applying these principles to dialogue with any specific religion or person, Christians can both express the truths of Christianity and deepen their own understanding of God as he is found, veiled as it were, in other major world religions. By that means, the Christian can effectively combine sincere dialogue and active evangelization to best fulfill Christ's mandate to preach the Gospel.