

Why is Fr. Peter Phan under investigation?

John L. Allen Jr. | Sep. 14, 2007 All Things Catholic

Over a decade ago, then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger laid out with crystal clarity what he saw as the greatest doctrinal threat of the day: a confluence of what he described as "the a-religious and practical relativism of Europe and America" with "Asia's negative theology," producing a profound mutation in core Christian teachings -- with Christ seen as simply another spiritual sage comparable to Buddha or Muhammad, and Christianity as one valid religious path among many others.

Since that cry of alarm, expressed in a 1996 address in Guadalajara, the question of what theological reading Catholicism should give to non-Christian faiths has been brought squarely into the Vatican's scope. Over the last decade, a string of writers and theologians treating the subject in various ways have found themselves facing a Vatican inquest -- including Tissa Balasuriya, Anthony de Mello (posthumously), Jacques Dupuis, Roger Haight and Jon Sobrino.

To anyone who knows this history, news this week that both the Vatican and the U.S. bishops are investigating a book by Fr. Peter Phan, another prominent writer on the theology of religions, thus comes as roughly as much of a surprise as the rising of the sun.

Born in Vietnam, Phan has lived in the United States since 1975, when his family arrived in Texas as refugees from the Vietnam War. A professor at Georgetown University and former president of the Catholic Theological Society of America, Phan also has close ties to the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences, and has argued forcefully for a positive role for non-Christian religions in God's plan for salvation. One might say that he incarnates precisely the intersection of East and West to which the future Pope Benedict XVI referred.

The protocol number for Phan's case in the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith is 537/2004-21114, indicating that the investigation was initiated in 2004, when Ratzinger was still the congregation's prefect. That's the same year that Orbis Books published Phan's *Being Religious Interreligiously: Asian Perspectives on Interreligious Dialogue*, which is the object of the two inquests.

It should be stressed that these investigations are works in progress, and the case could still have some twists and turns. It's worth recalling that with Dupuis, a Belgian Jesuit who had worked in India for 36 years, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith actually drafted three separate notifications on his 1997 book *Toward a Theology of Religious Pluralism*. Each version became gentler in tone and more cautious in substance. In the end, the final Vatican document did not accuse Dupuis of doctrinal error, merely potential ambiguities, which many regarded as a glancing blow. (As one Italian theologian put it at the time, "Even the

phone book is potentially ambiguous if you read it the right way.")

It may be that by the time the Phan case reaches conclusion, a similar softening will have occurred. Indeed, the four-page set of observations from the Committee on Doctrine of the U.S. bishops received by Phan in May 2007 seems milder in comparison to the seven-page critique sent in July 2005 by the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.

Moreover, it should also be underlined that's what under review is one book by Phan, not his status as a Catholic theologian nor his entire body of work. Though this point has probably not received the attention it merits, in recent years the CDF has made a clear distinction between investigating works of theology and investigating theologians. While the congregation may issue critical notifications on given works, it has generally refrained from imposing more sweeping bans on teaching, speaking and publishing, which might imply an indictment of the person tout court. There's no indication so far that either Rome or the American bishops intend to break with that practice in this case.

That said, the Phan investigation will be watched with keen interest in the theological guild -- in part because of the importance of the issues it raises, in part because of Phan's personal popularity. Whatever one makes of his conclusions, it would be difficult to find a more gracious figure in the Catholic theological firmament. Phan has also carefully avoided stirring the waters himself, refusing to comment publicly on the on-going investigations. He declined to respond to questions either for the [NCR news report](#) [1] on Wednesday that broke the story, or for this column.

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NCR has obtained copies of much of the back-and-forth correspondence among the Vatican, the U.S. bishops and Phan over the last three years. It begins with a July 20, 2005, letter from Archbishop Angelo Amato, the number two official of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, to Bishop Charles Grahmann of Dallas, informing him that the congregation has found "serious ambiguities and doctrinal problems" in Phan's *Being Religious Interreligiously*. Phan, a former Salesian, is now a priest of the Dallas diocese; Grahmann has since retired, and has been replaced by Bishop Kevin Farrell.

Amato, also a Salesian and rumored to have been critical of Phan's decision to leave the order, asked Grahmann to request that Phan write an article correcting the "problematic points," and that Phan instruct *Orbis* not to reprint his book. Enclosed was a seven-page set of observations on the book, written in English.

The observations make 19 points, grouped under these six broad headings:

- On the salvific value of non-Christian religions
- On the uniqueness and the universality of Jesus Christ
- On the relationship between Jesus, the Logos and the Holy Spirit
- On the uniqueness and the salvific universality of the Church
- On the relationship between Christianity and Judaism
- Other erroneous or confused statements

In general, the observations assert that Phan's book "is in open contrast with almost all the teachings of the declaration *Dominus Iesus*," a 2000 Vatican document which states that non-Christians are "in a gravely deficient situation in comparison with those who, in the church, have the fullness of the means of salvation."

Among the most serious charges in the CDF observations are that Phan's book can be read to suggest that:

- Non-Christian religions have a positive role in salvation history in their own right, and are not merely a preparation for the Christian Gospel;
- It makes little sense to try to convert non-Christians to Christianity;
- It would be better to avoid terms such as "unique," "absolute" and "universal" for the saving role of Christ;
- The Holy Spirit operates in a saving way in non-Christian religions independently of the Logos (meaning Christ as the Word of God);
- The Catholic Church cannot be identified with the church of Christ;
- God's covenant with the Jewish people does not find its completion in Jesus Christ.

The observations also assert that Phan's book "presents a mistaken conception of the nature and authority of the church's magisterium and in fact does not give it the proper consideration."

Finally, the observations say that there is a "gnostic tenor running through the book."

Phan replied on April 4 to Cardinal William Levada, the prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. He did not enter into the merits of the observations, though he said several were "preposterous."

Instead, Phan raised three procedural points. First, he objected to a requirement that his book not be reprinted even before his response to the observations had been assessed; second, he requested clarification about the scope of the article he was being asked to write; and third, he asked for financial compensation for the time it would take him to prepare a satisfactory reply.

As of this writing, the CDF had not responded.

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On May 15, 2007, Bishop William Lori of Bridgeport, Connecticut wrote to Phan as chair of the Committee on Doctrine for the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. Lori wrote that because the requests of the CDF had "proven unacceptable to you," his committee had been asked by the CDF to examine the book. Lori asked Phan to respond to a four-page set of observations enclosed with his letter.

As opposed to the CDF observations, those from the Committee on Doctrine are expressed in just three points:

- The uniqueness of Jesus Christ and the universality of his salvific mission
- The salvific significance of non-Christian religions
- The uniqueness of the church as the universal instrument of salvation

On the first point, the USCCB observations assert that statements in Phan's book "make it appear as if the revelation and salvation that God accomplished in Jesus Christ were similar in kind to what he has accomplished through other 'saving figures.'" Instead, the observations stress that Christ "is not simply one among the many founders of religions."

The observations also state that Catholic teaching sees non-Christian religions as possessing "certain elements of truth," but that these elements are "a preparation for the Gospel, not supernatural revelation explicitly revealed by God." Phan's book, according to the observations, rejects this view as "an insufficient recognition of the salvific significance of non-Christian religions in themselves."

Further, the observations assert, Phan's book comes to the conclusion that "the evangelization of non-Christian persons is no longer appropriate," a position it says "is in direct conflict with the church's commission, given to it by Christ himself, to proclaim the Gospel to all nations."

Finally, the observations state that the Catholic church "is a divine institution, the indispensable universal sacrament of salvation, willed by Christ himself," so that any grace that reaches non-Christians ultimately "must be seen in relationship to the church."

On May 23, 2007, Phan responded to Lori, indicating that he had previously had telephone conversations with Capuchin Fr. Thomas Weinandy, head of staff for Lori's committee.

Phan writes that he's willing to address the observations, and says that the reduction from 19 observations by the CDF to the three presented by the committee takes care of his request for clarification about the scope of his response. Phan reiterates, however, his request for a stay of the prohibition on reprinting his book, and for payment for his time and effort. Phan also cited numerous academic commitments that would make it difficult for him to respond quickly.

On June 20, 2007, Lori wrote back to tell Phan that most of his requests are "beyond the competence of the Committee on Doctrine to grant." Moreover, Lori writes that "this committee's examination of the content of the book is distinct from your discussions with the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith."

Lori set a deadline of Sept. 1, 2007, for a reply to the observations. "If the committee receives no response, it will move ahead with the publication of a statement that will make clear to the faithful the problems that the committee found with the book," Lori wrote.

Phan wrote to Lori on Aug. 16, saying that it would be "physically impossible" to respond prior to Sept. 1. At

this stage, it's not clear what the next move will be.

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On the face of it, Lori's June 20 letter seems to suggest that Phan faces two simultaneous inquiries, one from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and one from the Committee on Doctrine. That would be unusual, since normally the CDF waits for the local process to play out before taking up a case -- or, if the case raises urgent issues of broad importance, the CDF simply bypasses lower levels of review. Experts said that having both occur at once would be an anomaly.

One explanation may be that the July 2005 letter from Amato to Grahmann was prepared in the period between Ratzinger's election as pope, and Levada's arrival as the new head of the CDF. (That chronology might explain why the letter carried only the secretary's signature and not the prefect's.) Some observers speculate that Levada may have reviewed the file and decided that it would be better to allow the American bishops to handle the case, though without foreclosing the possibility of eventual Vatican action.

The unusual procedure may also reflect the high degree of significance that the doctrinal congregation, and the pope himself, attach to the issues raised by Phan's book.

In any event, it seems difficult to imagine that two separate investigations could move forward simultaneously, if for no other reason than responding at the level of detail usually required in even one such procedure often places an enormous burden on a theologian. Dupuis, for example, took a leave of absence from the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome in 1998 to write a book-length response to his observations from the CDF.

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Most theologians I contacted about the Phan case asked to speak without being identified, on the grounds that neither the Vatican nor the U.S. bishops have yet issued any formal statements. In general, they said, three broad issues seem to be at stake.

First are the merits of the substantive theological issues raised in Phan's book, and in the two sets of observations. While experts stress that each specific question must be treated individually, in general some theologians said that Phan pushes the envelope to a degree that requires authoritative correction, while others complained that the Vatican and, to some extent, the Committee on Doctrine seem to expect verbal repetition of formulas drawn from official church teaching such as *Dominus Iesus*, which, they argued, is not the nature of theological exploration.

Several theologians sympathetic to Phan also argued that church authorities tend to approach issues of religious diversity from a Western, often European, perspective, which perhaps does not do justice to Phan's background as a Vietnamese-American immigrant with deep ties to Asia. Critics, however, warned that views such as Phan's could sap the missionary energies of Catholicism in a moment when new opportunities seem to be opening up in Asia, above all in China. Pentecostals, they note, who are generally not locked in debates over the legitimacy of

exclusivist language, have recently posted impressive gains there.

Second, some theologians raised the strategic question of how the Vatican and the bishops can best defend church teaching in contemporary culture. While most agree that there is indeed a danger of religious relativism in today's secularized, post-modern world, some believe the church would be better served by allowing theologians such as Phan to try to work out a language that is, as one put it, "both orthodox and modern." These theologians argue that creative thinkers such as Phan, who are obviously sympathetic to the church's aims, actually represent its best line of defense against true relativism. Others, however, say that not everything comes down to differing modes of expression -- that there is a "rule of faith," a doctrinal bottom line, and however unpleasant it may be, somebody has to enforce it.

Third, some theologians argue that even if Phan goes too far on some points, church authorities would be wiser to allow normal theological debate to correct those errors, or even to enter the debate themselves in the form of presentations at scholarly meetings or in journal articles, rather than using the tools of authority -- which, some say, tend to polarize conversation. Others, however, believe that the theological community in Europe and the United States has not been notably successful in pruning such excess.

All this suggests that when, and if, there is a formal statement about Phan's book from either the Vatican or the U.S. bishops, vigorous debate will likely ensue.

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For additional background on Phan, readers may want to consult the Feb. 11, 2000 profile by Tom Fox published in the *National Catholic Reporter*: [A refugee's odyssey leads to theological peaks](#) [2]

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Theologians such as Dupuis and Phan are often associated with the outlook of the Federation of Asian Bishops Conferences. That connection has fueled speculation that the investigations of both men may be intended not merely as a reaction to their books, but also as a "shot across the bow" for the FABC.

The countries of the FABC encompass just over 110 million Catholics, which means that all of Asia has fewer Catholics (at least in terms of baptismal counts) than Brazil. Even this picture is a bit distorted; if one takes the Philippines, with 68 million Catholics, and India, with 17 million, out of the equation, the resulting total is 25 million -- roughly equivalent to the Catholic population of Germany. Yet size doesn't always matter, because despite their relatively small numbers, the Asian bishops have managed to galvanize much conversation in the global Church by pioneering what they call the "Triple Dialogue":

- Dialogue with the great cultures of Asia, leading to a deeper inculturation of Christian faith;
- Dialogue with the great religions of Asia, leading to mutual understanding and concrete cooperation where possible;

- Dialogue with the poor, leading to efforts at what the bishops call "integral liberation."

Since the Second Vatican Council (1962-65), the FABC has worked out a positive theological reading of religious diversity, downplaying anything that might be seen as intolerant or exclusivist. That's often presented as an especially important point in the context of some regions of Asia, above all India, where suspicions of Christian proselytism are a frequent flash-point for conflict. The press for inculturation, meaning a creative synthesis of the Christian Gospel with Asian culture, is a paramount concern.

One example came in October 2005, when a conference of priests and bishops at the Pune Papal Seminary in India recommended a sweeping program of "Indianization" of the Church, including performing the Hindu ritual of *aarti* during Mass (a ritual that involves lighting candles and singing), studying Sanskrit and the Vedas, experiencing ashram life, and participating in a *satsang* (a form of meditation and spiritual study under the guidance of a master.) In part, these practices were justified as a response to criticism that Christianity is hostile to Hindu traditions: "It would definitely put a check on the so-called fundamentalists who keep blaming us for conversions," said Indian Fr. Lionell Mascarenhas.

Archbishop Oswald Gracias of Mumbai, India, said in a 2006 interview with *NCR* that Asia can teach the church something about inculturation.

"The Holy Spirit guides us in a particular direction at a particular time, and today we're being led towards inculturation," he said. "In Asian societies, religion is seen as a necessary part of the culture. I believe the West has got to learn to respond to the signs of the times. Change and adaptation is necessary, and maybe the churches of the South, especially in Asia, can offer an example. Today, we try to be open to the Spirit with self-confidence, believing that inculturation is not going to take the church to the ruins."

While few would dispute that point in theory, where the rubber meets the road is how to apply it in practice.

To take just one example of how things can get sticky, the Asian bishops gathered in Rome in 1998 for the "Synod for Asia." Its theme was chosen by the Vatican: "Jesus Christ the Savior, and His Mission of Love and Service in Asia." At the time, some Asians complained the Vatican was insensitive to how exclusive-sounding language comes across in the context of Asia's religious diversity. When the FABC organized its own plenary meeting in 2000, the bishops decided to revisit some of the conversations from the synod. This time they picked their own theme: "A Mission of Love and Service."

To put that editorial choice into a sound-bite, the Asian bishops deleted Jesus. To be fair, their purpose was not to compromise church teaching, but to choose a phraseology that would not be seen as provocative in Asia. Nonetheless, in a pontificate in which defending traditional doctrine on Christ is the watchword, it's probably not surprising that such moves might raise blood pressure levels in Rome.

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