

# Theologian's book could mislead faithful, committee says

WASHINGTON - A Vietnamese-American theologian's 2004 book on religious pluralism contains "pervading ambiguities and equivocations that could easily confuse or mislead the faithful," the U.S. bishops' Committee on Doctrine said in a Dec. 10 statement.

Father Peter C. Phan's "Being Religious Interreligiously: Asian Perspectives on Interfaith Dialogue," published by Orbis Books, also contains "statements that, unless properly clarified, are not in accord with Catholic teaching," the committee said.

In its 15-page statement, the committee said it undertook an evaluation of "Being Religious Interreligiously" at the request of the Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and "invited Father Phan to respond" to questions.

"Since Father Phan did not provide the needed clarifications, and since the ambiguities in the book concern matters that are central to the faith, the Committee on Doctrine decided to issue a statement that would both identify problematic aspects of the book and provide a positive restatement of Catholic teaching on the relevant points," the statement said.

In response to a Catholic News Service query, Father Phan said in an e-mail message that he was not going to comment on the committee's statement. Orbis did not return a phone call from CNS seeking reaction.

The statement was signed by Bishop William E. Lori of Bridgeport, Conn., chairman of the Committee on Doctrine, and the six other committee members.

Father Phan, a former Salesian and now a priest of the Dallas Diocese, holds the Ellacuria chair of Catholic social thought in the theology department at Jesuit-run Georgetown University in Washington.

The statement on "clarifications required" in Father Phan's book cited three areas of

concern:

- Christ's role as "the unique and universal savior of all humankind."
- The "salvific significance of non-Christian religions."
- The Catholic Church as "the unique and universal instrument of salvation."

Quoting frequently from the book, the documents of the Second Vatican Council and "Dominus Iesus," the 2000 declaration of the Vatican doctrinal congregation on the "unicity and salvific universality of Jesus Christ and the church," the committee said Father Phan's book "could leave readers in considerable confusion as to the proper understanding of the uniqueness of Christ."

Although "the uniqueness of Jesus Christ is affirmed at some points" in the book, it is presented at other times as "not exclusive or absolute," the committee said.

Father Phan says in the book that the terms "unique," "absolute" and "universal" in relation to Jesus' role as savior "have outlived their usefulness and should be jettisoned and replaced by other, theologically more adequate equivalents."

But "Dominus Iesus" declares that theological understandings of Jesus as just one of many historical figures who manifest "the infinite, the absolute, the ultimate mystery of God" are in "profound conflict with the Christian faith," the committee said.

Although the church finds "elements of goodness and truth" in other religions "as a preparation for the Gospel," Father Phan's book "rejects this teaching as an insufficient recognition of the salvific significance of non-Christian religions in themselves," the statement said.

By asserting that "God has positively willed non-Christian religions as alternative ways of salvation," the book calls into question "the very goal itself of universal conversion to Christianity" and implies that "to continue the Christian mission to members of non-Christian religions would be contrary to God's purpose in history," the committee said.

But the church sees its evangelizing mission not as "an imposition of power but an

expression of love for the whole world,” the statement added. “Thus there is no necessary conflict between showing respect for other religions and fulfilling Christ’s command to proclaim the Gospel to all the nations.”

Father Phan’s book also says the church’s claim “as the unique and universal instrument of salvation” should be “abandoned altogether,” primarily because of “the humanness of the church and her historical entanglement with sin and injustice,” the committee said.

“The book is certainly correct when it points out that members of the church, through the course of history, have sinned and that the credibility of Christian witness to the world has suffered greatly from this,” it added. “Nevertheless, the holiness of the church is not simply defined by the holiness (or sinfulness) of her members but by the holiness of her head, the lord Jesus Christ.”

As “Dominus Iesus” points out, “it would be contrary to the faith to consider the church as one way of salvation alongside those constituted by the other religions, seen as complementary to the church or substantially equivalent to her,” the committee said.