

William Lane Craig on Luis de Molina and the Catholic Church: A Theological Synthesis

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One of the most creative theological syntheses ever formulated on the compatibility of divine sovereignty and human freedom in the history of Christian thought was devised by Luis de Molina (1535-1600). Although Molina's philosophy was contested by the Thomists, a special congregation in the Roman Catholic Church decided that it was consistent with Catholic theology in 1607.¹ Nevertheless, the second and third revivals of Thomism in the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries soon overshadowed Molina's illuminating ideas with regard to divine foreknowledge. Despite this longstanding decline, Molinism has come roaring back in philosophical circles in the last thirty years under the tutelage of William Lane Craig, Thomas Flint, Alfred Freddosso and Alvin Plantinga.²

Due to the lack of Molinist philosophy in much of contemporary Catholic theology, I will draw out some of the more interesting aspects of Molinism in light of the need within the Church to look at innovative approaches to develop the motivation that is needed for mission work. Within a Molinist perspective, the underlying rationale for the evangelizing component of mission work in the face of the possibility that non-Christians can still be saved can be strengthened. One of the leading spokesmen of Molinism is the American Evangelical philosopher William Lane Craig. I will focus on his writings in particular for the purposes of this essay.

Introduction to Molinism

In Molina's philosophy, God knows what every person will freely do in every possible circumstance that could be placed in front of each of them before he creates the universe. Exhausting every possible contingency, including birthplace, genetics, upbringing, and personality, God's knowledge of these circumstances is known as middle knowledge (Latin: *scientia media*). Molinists refer to all of these possible scenarios as feasible worlds, all of which reside in the mind of God before the universe is created. Hence, one of the most basic assumptions in Molina's philosophy is that there are other worlds that God *could have* created but chose not to make.

Applying the middle knowledge view to the doctrine of salvation *extra ecclesiam*, God knows that before he creates the universe that some individuals who will not have the opportunity to hear and affirmatively respond to the Gospel during their earthly lives are those same individuals who would not accept the Gospel (and be baptized) if they had the chance to hear it. Apparently God knows that some people will refuse to believe in the Gospel no matter what circumstances he could have placed in front of them in any logically possible feasible world.

On the other hand, if a person would have responded to the Gospel in at least one feasible world (which is logically prior to the initial creation event), then God will ensure that he or she will be born in a time and place where they will hear and respond to the

Gospel in the actual world and be saved (Craig 1995, 115.). Let us therefore summarize the Molinist view of salvation *extra ecclesiam*.

First, Molinists maintain that non-Christians can be saved by responding favorably to the light of grace that God has given to them through nature and their conscience (Ibid. 89; c.f. Rom 2:6,7) God will judge the unevangelized on the basis of their response to his grace through these means. Every person that honestly seeks the truth and lives an upright life can receive eternal salvation.

Second, God cannot guarantee that every person that he can create (in every feasible world) will freely choose to respond to his grace and be saved in the actual world. Certainly, it is logically impossible for God to make persons to freely choose actions that go against their will to perform. Every person who refuses to accept the Gospel in the actual world does so because they distance themselves from God's gracious offer to them, not because God has failed to place them in a set of circumstances in which they could have favorably responded to his love. Because logical truths flow essentially from his perfect nature, God cannot perform logically contradictory actions.

Third, God knows all logical possibilities, including those possibilities that can and will occur in the actual world before it is brought into being. Seen within this framework, God knows what every free human person will do in every circumstance before they perform them in the real world. It is possible that God is unable to create a world in which every person will freely choose to respond favorably to the Gospel. Rather, God picks out the best feasible world; the world in which the most people are saved and the least amount are lost. That is the world he creates. Moreover, this is the world that we currently inhabit.

Fourth, before God creates the universe, he knows that in every feasible world that there are some individuals who will always refuse to positively respond to the Good News regardless of the circumstances that could have placed in front of them. These persons suffer from what is known as transworld depravity. So although it is logically possible that every human person can and will accept the Gospel and be saved in every feasible world, it is *actually impossible* for God to create such a world. If such a feasible world were even possible for God to create, then God would have brought it about. According to Craig:

It's possible that in every world which God could create, someone would freely reject Christ. Again, God could force them to believe, but then that would be a sort of divine rape. Love for God that is not freely given is not truly love. Thus, so long as men are free, there can be no guarantee that they will all freely believe in him (Craig 1990, 112).

On the one hand, persons who suffer from "transworld depravity" are incapable of being evangelized in any of the feasible worlds that God could have actualized. Conversely, everyone who would have responded in faith to the Good News in at least one feasible world before the actual world is actualized will have the opportunity to hear and respond to the Gospel at least once in their lifetime (Craig 1995, 115). Those who are lost in the actual world are those who were lost in every feasible world to begin with.

The orthodox Molinist simply does not know how many people will be saved or lost in the end (Dulles 2003).

Fifth, despite the amount of people who will refuse to accept the Gospel, the reason why God created the world is that God wanted to share his love with persons who are capable of freely reciprocating to his love. God deems it better to create a world in which some individuals will be lost rather than not creating at all. If God creates, he does his best. In the final analysis, the actual world is not the best of all possible worlds (*contra* Leibniz), but is the best of all possible ways to get to the best of all possible worlds. God has chosen to create the feasible world which achieves the optimal balance between the saved and the lost. Persons then can be saved through missionaries, but no one will be lost because of the failures of missionaries (Craig 2004). While it is logically possible for everyone to be saved, it is actually impossible for God to create such a world.

Salvation Outside the Church According to Catholic Teaching

Undoubtedly the Catholic Church's primary ecclesiastical sources for explaining the doctrine of salvation outside the Church are found in the documents of Vatican II. Other papal documents that reaffirm, clarify, and defend the Council's teaching must be used as well. After this section, I will turn to the various ways in which Molinism is thought to reinforce the Church's vision of mission work.

Although many theologians have sought to explain away the notion that the Catholic Church sees herself as the one true religion since Vatican II, the classical axiom "no salvation outside the Church" is still constitutive of the Council's teaching (Vatican II *Dignitatis Humane* N. 1; *Lumen Gentium* N. 8; *Unitatis Redintegratio* N. 8). Like all shorthand slogans, however, the axiom *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* reveals some of the truth, but conceals it in other ways. The axiom has never been interpreted in sheer black and white terms (Sullivan 1992). Although the Church stresses the importance of respecting religions, spiritualities, and cultures that are different or contrary from the Church's own, Vatican II as a whole does not endorse a "false irenicism" or a religious indifferentism (Vatican II *Nostra Aetate*. N. 2)

The Council does not limit eternal salvation to Catholics alone. Persons who do not know anything about Christ and the Church can receive salvation. According to *Lumen Gentium*: "There are those who without any fault do not know anything about Christ or his church, yet who search for God with a sincere heart and, under the influence of grace, try to put into effect the will of God as known to them through the dictate of conscience: these too can obtain eternal salvation." Further, "Nor does divine Providence deny the helps that are necessary for salvation to those who, through no fault of their own, have not yet attained to express recognition of God yet who strive, not without divine grace, to live an upright life" (Vatican II *Lumen Gentium*. N. 16)

No matter what circumstances that persons might be in, everyone has the opportunity to be saved. But christological grace is always involved in salvation. As Francis Sullivan of Boston College writes: "There is no doubt about the conciliar teaching that people who never arrive at Christian faith and baptism can be saved" (Sullivan 1992, 162). According to the Council, persons who are saved outside of

Christianity must be invincibly ignorant about the Gospel. Conversely, those who have been exposed to the Gospel are held more accountable to live out their divine calling (Vatican II *Lumen Gentium* N. 14).

If someone suspects that the Catholic Church is the one true faith, then the honest thing for them to do is to pursue their questions in the best way that they can. Mental reservations or moral hesitations will not fool an all-knowing God. Put in this way, St. Augustine's evaluation of salvation outside the Church rings true in current Catholic theology: "For in the ineffable foreknowledge of God, many who appear to be without are within, while many who appear to be within are without" (Augustine 27.38)

Now it is true that the Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in non-Christian religions (Vatican II *Nostra Aetate* N. 2). Non-Christian religions prepare individuals to receive the fullness of the Gospel (Vatican II *Lumen Gentium* N. 16). The Council approves of the world's religions in the sense that they contain elements of truth that can dispose individuals to receive Christ if they explicitly hear the Gospel. So, the Church's revolutionary stance at Vatican II did not lie in its affirmation that non-Christians could be saved, but in its refusal to call non-Catholics "pagans," "heathens," "idolaters," and the like. Instead of openly criticizing views that are contrary or contradictory to Catholic doctrine, Vatican II seeks to find what is good and holy in other religions instead (Ruokanen 1992, 102-3). For the first time in conciliar history a positive statement is ascribed to other religions (albeit positive ascriptions are made by Christian thinkers before Vatican II). Salvation can be found *in* other religions, but is definitely not *of* these religions. As theologian James Fredericks suggests, "Nowhere in its documents does the council unambiguously recognize the other religions as actual mediations of the saving grace of Jesus Christ" (Fredericks 2003, 233). Other religions are seen as participated forms of mediation in the one divine revelation that has been given to humanity in Christ (Vatican II *Lumen Gentium* N. 62).

Those persons who are invincibly ignorant of the Gospel who lead an upright life and are obedient to God's voice in conscience can attain eternal salvation. These persons receive a special kind of grace that is known to God himself (Vatican II *Ad Gentes* N. 7; *Gaudium et Spes* N. 22). This special grace is not in opposition to or separated from the infusion of christological grace. Ruokanen states: "there is no certainty of salvation outside the Church, but those who by some sort of unconscious desire or intention (*in scio quodam desiderio ac voto*) belong to the Church are part of the body of Christ." He goes on to say: "Here again the emphasis lies on the mediation of salvation by the Church, but the idea of 'the Catholic unity' is enlarged. The limits of the Church are not visible and strict. Those non-Catholics and non-Christians who are sensitive to God's call in their inner self are in some secret manner latent members of that society to whom the explicit means of salvation are available" (Ruokanen 1992, 18).

One way to interpret the Catholic view on salvation *extra ecclesiam* is to understand the Thomistic nature-grace distinction: grace builds on nature and brings it to perfection. Persons who are invincibly ignorant about the Christian message are saved by receiving a special grace that is known to God himself. Radical interpretations of the Church's teaching that construct their theologies from within the sphere of grace (redemption) rather than nature (creation) with respect to the status of non-Christian salvation (or, those who are unaccountable to respond to the preaching of the Gospel)

deviate from Catholic teaching. “According to Conciliar theology,” says Ruokanen, “religions are human cultural phenomena which belong to the natural goodness of life based on *gratia creata sive communis*; but as such, they consist neither of *revelatio specialis* nor of *gratia increata sive supernaturalis*” (Ibid. 70).

One of the primary goals of the mission component to evangelization is to transform societies. This is known as the qualitative aspect to missions. But it must be admitted that there is a quantitative aspect to missions in Catholic thinking as well—to proclaim and persuade others unto the Gospel. Within the quantitative aspect to missions there are at least four reasons in light of Catholic teaching to engage in missions. First, we are commanded by Christ to participate in his saving work of humanity (Vatican II *Ad Gentes*, N. 13, 15, 30, 39, 40, 41). Second, it is only natural to become evangelical when one is truly born of the Spirit (2 Cor. 5:11). The Christian knows that faith increases when it is given to others (John Paul II, N.2). Third, the Magisterium continues to affirm that the fullness of revealed truth is found within the Catholic fold alone. Religious truth that is found outside the Church is not seen as complementary or parallel to the one divine revelation that has been given in Christ. Lastly, those who do not hear and respond to the Gospel in faith are not assured of their eternal salvation.

The Compatibility of Craig’s Molinism and the Catholic Church

William Lane Craig has prematurely concluded that the Council has ruined the Church’s motivation to participate in the saving aspect of missions. In his words:

Missiologically, a broad inclusivism undermines the task of world missions. Since vast numbers of persons in non-Christian religions are in fact already included in salvation, they need not be evangelized. Instead missions are reinterpreted along the lines of social engagement—a sort of Christian social peace corps, if you will. Nowhere is this reinterpretation of missions better illustrated than in the documents of the Second Vatican Council. In its Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, the Council declared that those who have not yet received the gospel are related in various ways to the people of God. Jews, in particular, remain dear to God, but the plan of salvation also includes all who acknowledge the Creator, such as Muslims. The Council therefore declared that Catholics now pray *for* the Jews not for the *conversion* of the Jews and also declares that the Church looks with esteem upon Muslims. Missionary work seems to be directed only toward those ‘who serve the creature rather than the Creator’ or are utterly hopeless. The Council thus implies that vast multitudes of persons who consciously reject Christ are in fact saved and therefore not appropriate targets for evangelization (Craig 1995, 85).

Craig’s interpretation of Vatican II is multiply confused. Of course, Catholics are to pray *for* Jews and Muslims. As Scripture says, Christians are to pray for *everyone* (1 Tim. 2:4). Since the Catholic Church still considers herself the one true faith, it is axiomatic

that the quantitative aspect to evangelization remains constitutive of conciliar theology. Unfortunately, Craig has used the qualitative aspect of mission work as the sole hermeneutical lens by which to interpret the Council.

Instead of surveying all of the Council's teaching, Craig has endorsed a popular interpretation of the Council that is all too prevalent nowadays. As we have seen, the esteem that the Church has for non-Christians should not be construed from within the standpoint of the theology of redemption, but from creation—meaning from those commendable human qualities that all persons share together. Commenting on paragraph 22 of *Guadium et Spes*, Ruokanen emphasizes that: “Non-Christians reflect the truth only insofar as their life is in accordance with natural knowledge of the one God and of natural moral law. This means that in LG 16 the possibility of an extraordinary way of salvation is reduced to the sphere of theology of creation and to general conception of God and morals included therein” (Ruokanen 1992, 99). Noticing the same erroneous trajectories in Catholic theology, Benedict Ashley concurs: “Karl Rahner's important theory of ‘the anonymous Christian’ has been mistakenly taken to imply that since the Good News has already been heard by everyone willing to hear it, evangelization is unnecessary. All that is needed is ecumenical dialogue to help all to recognize that they really are already of one faith” (Ashley 2000, vii).

Citing the Evangelical theologian Clark Pinnock, Craig explains the problems that accompanies a wider inclusivism:

(1) God has called us to engage in mission work and we should obey. But this provides no rationale for why God commanded such a thing and so amounts to just blind obedience to a command without rationale. (2) Missions is broader than just securing people's eternal destiny. True enough; but with that central rationale removed we are back at the Christian peace corps. (3) Missions should be positive; it is not an ultimatum ‘Believe or be damned.’ Of course; but it is difficult to see what urgency is left to world missions, since the people to whom one goes are already saved. I must confess that I find it tragically ironic that as the church stands on the verge of completing the task of world evangelization, it should be her own theologians who would threaten to trip her at the finish line (Craig 1995, 86).

Notice that these three points coincide with the first three points of the Catholic Church's underlying rationale to engage in missions. However, Craig does not seem to realize that his appropriation of Molinism *reinforces* the Catholic Church's teaching over those radical interpretations of the Church's teaching that he rightly disagrees with. The Church would go much further than Craig's straw man depiction of the Council's theology and unwaveringly maintain along with Craig himself that part of the reason to engage in mission work is to evangelize others unto Christ.

Aside from these minor scuffles between Craig and the Church, both of their views converge in many respects. Both of them rightly reject a strict exclusivism. Though Craig prefers to call himself a “particularist” instead of an “exclusivist,” he still maintains that people can be saved outside of cognitive belief in the Savior. One does

not have to have explicit faith in Jesus to be saved. As we have seen, this is the same outlook as Vatican II. Second, Craig also holds that persons who through no fault of their own can achieve salvation by responding to God's love for them in nature and conscience by living an upright life. Again, there is no problem here. Lastly, both deny the validity of religious pluralism *de jure*: "a move away from insistence on the superiority or finality of Christ and Christianity toward a recognition of the independent validity of other ways" (Hick and Knitter 1997, viii). All religions are not equally valid paths to the Triune God.

One of the reasons why *Dominus Iesus* (2000) was written was to summon Catholic theologians to provide an underlying rationale to preach the Gospel in a world in which it is well known that persons outside of Christianity can still be saved (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith 2000, N. 3, 14, 21, 23). Within a Molinist perspective, Catholics can make greater sense of three well-established truths that *Dominus Iesus* clarified after the Council. The first is that divine revelation has been given on behalf of all persons. No more revelations are to be expected from God. Nor are special revelations to be found in other religions (even though truths of natural revelation can still be found in them). The second truth is that every person has the opportunity to be saved. Lastly, Catholics must make every effort to evangelize others insofar as this is humanly possible.

With these three truths in balance, the Catholic Molinist holds that the motivation to preach the Gospel has not been diminished but enhanced. On the one hand, God has so providentially ordered the world that missionaries will arrive on the scene of unevangelized regions and preach the Gospel to those persons that God knew from eternity would favorably accept the message if they had the chance to hear it. While Scripture is not a philosophical text, it seems consistent with this picture. In Acts 17:25-27, we read: "He made from one the whole human race to dwell on the entire surface of the earth, *and he fixed the ordered seasons and the boundaries of their regions, so that people might seek God, even perhaps grope for him and find him, though indeed he is not far from any one of us.*" Consider the words of John Paul II:

In proclaiming Christ to non-Christians, the missionary is convinced that through the working of the Spirit, *there already exists in individuals and peoples an expectation, even if an unconscious one, of knowing the truth about God, about man, and about how we are to be set free from sin and death.* The missionary's enthusiasm in proclaiming Christ comes from the conviction that he is responding to that expectation, and so he does not become discouraged or cease his witness even when he is called to manifest his faith in an environment that is hostile or indifferent (emphasis mine) (John Paul II, 45).

On the other hand, God knows that some persons living in unevangelized regions of the world who have never had the opportunity to hear the message of Christ are the same individuals who would not accept the Gospel even if they had the chance to hear it. The Molinist points out that persons can be *saved* in response to missionary labors but that no one will be *lost* because of their failures (Cf. Craig 1993, 261-5)

The Molinist believes that as Christians we should not be so concerned about the millions of people that have lived and died without hearing the Gospel as much as we should be concerned about the way that God will deal with those who have accepted the Good News—and have not responded to the missionary mandate. As the Fathers of the Council have said: “All children of the Church should nevertheless remember that their exalted condition results, not from their own merits, but from the grace of Christ. If they fail to respond in thought, word and deed to that grace, not only shall they not be saved, but they shall be more severely judged” (Vatican II *Lumen Gentium*, 14).

Conclusion

Within a Molinist viewpoint the Catholic’s underlying rationale to engage in mission work in a world where it is well known that persons outside of Christianity can still be saved can be strengthened. The so-called problem of soteriological evil is a non-issue for the Christian Molinist. It is surprising that Catholic theologians have not noticed Molina’s popularity in philosophical circles and appropriated his ideas to doctrines such as salvation *extra ecclesiam*. Hopefully this trend will change and we will be more inviting of his illuminating ideas in light of the challenges that all Christians are facing with respect to the demands of inter-religious dialogue.

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Notes

¹ For a short discussion on the major points of debate between the Jesuit Molinists and Dominicans at the beginning of the 17th century, see William Lane Craig, “The Middle Knowledge View,” *Divine Foreknowledge: Four Views*, ed. James Beilby and Paul R. Eddy. Downer’s Grove: Intervarsity Press. 2001. 120-123.

² See William Lane Craig, *The Only Wise God: the Compatibility of Divine Foreknowledge and Human Freedom*, (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2000); Thomas P. Flint, *Divine Providence: The Molinist Account*, (Cornell: Cornell University Press, 2006), 75-178; Alfred J. Freddosso, *On Divine Foreknowledge, Part IV of the Concordia by Luis de Molina*, (Cornell: Cornell University Press, 2004); Alvin Plantinga, *The Nature of Necessity*, (Oxford :Oxford University Press, 1979).