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‘Go therefore and make disciples of all nations’: recent Catholic teaching on non-Christian religions

Jonathan W. Chappell

Since the Second Vatican Council (1962–65), the impact of the Catholic Church’s teaching on non-Christian religions has been dramatic. John Henry Newman is renowned for having spoken of the ‘development of doctrine’. However, what has taken place within the Church over the last few decades constitutes nothing less than a decisive paradigm shift in the way that Catholicism regards its evangelising mission and, in particular, how it interprets Christ’s great evangelizing commission: ‘Go therefore and make disciples of all nations...’ (Matthew 28:19).

LEGACY OF EXCLUSIVISM

The post-conciliar Church has travelled a considerable distance since the time of Pope Boniface VIII, who famously (or, perhaps, infamously) declared that: ‘*Extra ecclesiam nulla salus*’ (‘outside the Church there is no salvation’). Indeed, in *Unam sanctam* (1302), Boniface was emphatic that ‘in the time of the flood there was one ark of Noah ... having one ruler and one governor, namely Noah, outside of which we read that everything existing on the earth was destroyed’.¹ In other words, only those who resided within the bosom of Holy Mother Church were assured of a place in paradise. This uncompromising position was axiomatic within the Church from at least the end of the third century. It gained ascendancy in the medieval period and remained dominant until the Second Vatican Council. As a form of exclusivism, it taught that ‘legitimate’ Christianity denied truth to any other religion. Consequently, the truth-claims of other belief systems were regarded as false – or, at the very least, fundamentally flawed. A characteristic feature of this exclusivism was its heavy reliance on

1 Diarmaid MacCulloch, *A History of Christianity*, Penguin 2009, pp. 558–559.

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the New Testament. For example, texts such as John 14.6: ‘Jesus said, “I am the Way, the Truth and the Life”’, were employed to support the contention that the primary mission of the Church was to convert the ‘non-believer’ (or the ‘heathen’) by bringing them to true and authentic faith in Christ. In addition to the teaching of Boniface VIII, such exclusivism was affirmed in the *Decree for the Jacobites* promulgated by the Council of Florence (1442). This pronouncement held that ‘neither pagans nor Jews nor heretics nor schismatic, can become partakers of eternal life’.²

There are certainly advantages to this ‘all or nothing’ approach to faith. For example, by taking seriously the Church’s exclusive access to divine truth, it both makes members of the Church more confident in the righteousness of their cause and also, as a result of this, makes evangelization, through vigorous proselytization, more effective. Indeed, the Catholic Church, historically, has not had a monopoly on exclusivism: it has also been strongly espoused by Protestant theologians, among them Hendrik Kraemer (1888-1965).³ And few would dispute that it looms large in many contemporary forms of Islam

GROWING AWARENESS OF THE RICH DIVERSITY OF CULTURES

However, the Catholic Church does not exist in some extra-historical vacuum, any more than any other institution. By the mid-twentieth century, an increasing awareness of the rich diversity of cultures and belief-systems made a dogged adherence to exclusivism more difficult to justify both intellectually and morally. Moreover, there was a growing appreciation that all religions serve a crucial *existential* need: they offer answers to fundamental human questions relating to meaning and purpose. Many were also beginning to reach the *theological* conclusion that all human beings are made in the ‘image and likeness of God’, form a single community, and have one origin and destiny in God. Thus, when Pope John XXIII announced his intention to convoke a Council in 1959, the time was ripe for a reconfiguration of the Church’s approach to the modern world in general, and of its relationship to other non-Christian religions in particular.⁴

What, then, was the impact of Vatican II on the Church’s

2 Gavin D’Costa, *Vatican II: Catholic Doctrines on Jews and Muslims*, Oxford University Press 2014, p. 64.

3 See Hendrik Kraemer, *The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World*, Edinburgh House Press, 1938. Such exclusivism can also be discerned in the writings of Lesslie Newbigin (1909-1998), a Bishop of the Church of South India. See his *The Gospel in a Pluralistic Society*, SPCK Publishing, 2014.

4 Gerald O’Collins, *The Second Vatican Council and Other Religions*, Oxford University Press 2013, pp. 147–148.

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evangelizing mission to non-Christian religions? The shift in approach can best be discerned in the conciliar documents. *Lumen Gentium* (LG), for instance, was decisive. While it contained no explicit reference to dialogue, it laid the foundation for future engagement with non-Christian religions by expanding the notion of Church as *people of God* to include (to varying degrees) adherents of other faiths: ‘Finally, those who have not yet accepted the gospel [non-Christians] are related to the people of God [the church] in various ways ...’ (LG 16). Though non-Christians may not be said to be *members of the church per se*, they are related or *ordered (ordinatur)* to the church in varying degrees (LG 13). This teaching is echoed by other conciliar documents, such as *Gaudium et Spes* (GS), which avers that the ‘fruits of the spirit’ are not reserved to Christians but apply ‘to all people of good will in whose hearts grace is secretly at work’ (GS 22).

TRUTH AND GOODNESS IN NON-CHRISTIAN RELIGIONS

A further crucial development involved the acknowledgement of the presence of truth and goodness among non-Christian religions. Such religions are not simply dangerously misguided and subversive social constructions which can be dismissed as fundamentally erroneous; on the contrary, the truth and goodness that they contain should be respected, because, while such elements properly belong to the Church, they can nonetheless serve as a preparation for the Gospel. This means that, although God’s special revelation was first delivered to Israel, and ultimately found its fulfilment in Christ, ‘the plan for salvation also embraces those who acknowledge the Creator, and among these the Moslems are the first; they profess to hold the faith of Abraham and along with us they worship the one merciful God who will judge humanity on the last day’ (LG 16).

It is significant, however, that, while *Lumen Gentium* contained an impressive degree of openness to non-Christian religions, and maintained that God is present and active in non-Christian religions, it re-affirmed the duty of the Church to preach the Gospel to all peoples and invite them to conversion.

NOSTRA AETATE: THE NEED FOR DIALOGUE

The apogee of the conciliar statements concerning the Church’s relations with non-Christian religions, and how it should approach the thorny issue of its evangelising mission, is undoubtedly to be found in one of the last of documents to be issued: *Nostra Aetate* (NA) (1965). This short document, consisting of only five sections,

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further develops the ideas of *Lumen Gentium*. In particular, it explicitly calls upon the Church to enter into constructive dialogue with non-Christian traditions. Such a dialogical approach is encouraged because: 'From ancient until modern times there is found among various peoples a certain perception of that unseen force which is present in the course of things and in events in human life, and sometimes even an acknowledgement of a supreme deity or even a Father' (NA 2).

In addition to the other two monotheistic traditions, Judaism and Islam, which are seen as especially close to Christianity, stemming as they do from the one Abrahamic source, *Nostra Aetate* devotes attention to Hinduism and Buddhism. While these faiths might at first sight appear radically different from the Judeo-Christian tradition, *Nostra Aetate* insists that 'The Catholic Church rejects nothing of those things which are true and holy in these religions' – or, indeed, in any religions which sincerely seek after truth (NA 2). For, while such non-Christian faiths are 'often at variance' with what the Catholic Church 'holds and expounds', they 'frequently reflect a ray of that truth which enlightens everyone' (NA 2).

Nevertheless, *Nostra Aetate* immediately goes on to say that, notwithstanding the 'ray of truth' which these non-Christian religions contain, the Church is obliged to preach 'Christ who is the "way, the truth and the life" (Jn 14, 6) in whom people find the fullness of religious life and in whom God has reconciled all things to himself' (NA 2). And it is precisely the tension between these two sentiments – on the one hand, an openness to truth and goodness in non-Christian religions; on the other, an insistence that the Catholic Church nonetheless possesses the fullness of truth and, moreover, has a duty to preach that truth to non-believers – which has characterised much of the theological debate which has taken place within the Church since Vatican II.

POSSIBLE WAYS FORWARD

How, then, in the light of Vatican II, is it possible to navigate one's way between these seemingly antithetical positions? One possible response is a return to the exclusivism of the pre-Vatican II era. However, there are obvious shortcomings to exclusivism: it is wholly unreceptive to historical-critical exegesis; it fails to take seriously empirical facts about other religions; and it promotes an imperialist (not to say bellicose) stance towards any tradition which does not affirm its own absolutist prejudices. There are, mercifully, very few theologians who currently advocate this position, except, perhaps, those who might identify with schismatic movements such as the Society of Pius X. The majority of contemporary Catholic

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theologians advance either pluralist or inclusivist positions. We shall consider each approach in turn.

PLURALISM

Although their number is not large, some Catholic theologians are drawn to pluralism. Associated with scholars such as John Hick, Paul Knitter and Wilfred Cantwell Smith, pluralists hold that there should be ‘a move away from insistence on the superiority or finality of Christ and Christianity toward recognition of the independent validity of other ways’.⁵ Inspired by Wittgenstein’s notion of ‘language games’, pluralism maintains that no belief system can gain access to objective truth or reality, assuming that there is such a thing.⁶ All religious beliefs and practices are cultural, linguistic and historical constructs, which reflect the ‘forms of life’ of those who adhere to them. For pluralists, then, all religions are equally true internally, but at the same time equally false, because they do not ultimately correspond to an extra-paradigmatic (or mind-independent) reality. While it is possible to commend pluralism for its openness and tolerance, the obvious danger of this position is that it relativizes religious truth-claims to such an extent as to render them devoid of any content, coherence or meaning.

INCLUSIVISM

A much more common, and persuasive, position amongst Catholic theologians is that of inclusivism. This has been characterised as a kind of *via media* between the Scylla of exclusivism and the Charybdis of pluralism, in that it endeavours to promote dialogue, understanding and inter-faith cooperation, while at the same time preserving what is distinctive about Catholicism. While species of inclusivism (or ‘universalism’) have existed since the beginning of Christian history (it was defended by Church Fathers – for example, Gregory of Nyssa), it has come into its own since Vatican II. One leading proponent of inclusivism was the Jesuit theologian Karl Rahner, well known for his concept of the ‘Anonymous Christian’. For Rahner, ‘Christianity does not simply confront the members of an extra-Christian religion as a mere non-Christian but as someone who can and must already be regarded in this or that respect as an anonymous Christian’.⁷ In other words, Rahner further developed

5 John Hick and Paul F. Knitter (eds.), *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness*, Orbis Books 1988, p. viii.

6 See John Hick, *The Rainbow of Faiths: Critical Dialogues on Religious Pluralism*, SCM Press, 1995, pp. 24-30.

7 Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, vol. 5, Darton, Longman and Todd 1974, p. 131.

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the ‘inclusiveness’ of *Lumen Gentium* and *Nostra Aetate* by affirming that, while it is indeed Christ alone who saves, adherents of non-Christian religions are already, in some mysterious sense, incipient possessors of the truth.

Some theologians, among them Jacques Dupuis SJ, have taken this line of thought further, and have spoken of the need for an ‘inclusivist pluralism’.⁸ This claims that non-Christian religions are not just *de facto* but also *de jure* paths to salvation. Such a position, which some see as being dangerously close to pluralism, maintains that human beings gain salvation not *in spite* of their religion but *within* their religions.⁹

DOMINUS IESUS: A RESPONSE TO ‘NEW DEVELOPMENTS’

Notwithstanding the success of the October 1986 interreligious celebration of faith in Assisi, presided over by Pope John Paul II, the Church’s Magisterium has, perhaps understandably, expressed some concern – not to say alarm – over what it has perceived to be the subjectivizing and relativizing tendencies of theologians such as Dupuis, and has sought to re-affirm the central soteriological role of Christ. In 2000, for instance, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF) issued *Dominus Iesus*, in response to ‘new developments’ arising in the fields of ecumenical and interreligious engagements. The document took great pains to re-emphasise the uniqueness and salvific universality of Jesus Christ and the Church, and stressed that other religions are not autonomous and self-sufficient paths to salvation.¹⁰

POPE FRANCIS ON THE DIVERSITY OF RELIGIONS

On 4 February 2019, on his Apostolic Visit to Abu Dhabi, Pope Francis caused some consternation when he and Sheikh Ahmad Al-Tayyeb, the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, jointly signed a Document on Human Fraternity which declared that ‘the pluralism and the diversity of religions ... are willed by God’.¹¹ Given the Church’s traditional insistence on the uniqueness of God’s revelation in Christ, concerns were raised by Raymond Cardinal Burke,

8 Jacques Dupuis, *Christianity and the Religions*, Darton, Longman and Todd 2002. See also Jacques Dupuis, *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism*, Orbis Books 2002.

9 Gerald O’Collins, *Second Vatican Council and Other Religions*, pp. 181–196.

10 See also Joseph Ratzinger, *Truth and Tolerance: Christian Belief and World Religions*, Ignatius Press 2003.

11 See Apostolic Journey of His Holiness Pope Francis to the United Arab Emirates, a document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together, February 4, 2019, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/travels/2019/outside/documents/papa-francesco_20190204_documento-fratellanza-umana.html.

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Bishop Athanasius Schneider, and other conservative Catholic theologians¹² that Francis appeared to be in danger of lapsing into relativism by suggesting that God *positively* wills the existence of all religions. In a General Audience held on 3 April 2019, however, Francis sought to clarify his teaching on the diversity of religions by distinguishing between the ‘positive’ will of God and the ‘permissive’ will (*voluntas permissiva*) of God. While God does not positively will the existence of all religions, the Pope stated, God nonetheless ‘permits’ them to exist.¹³

CONCLUSION

We are left with the question of how the modern Church should understand its evangelising mission. The answer surely lies in that form of inclusivism that, as *Nostra Aetate* teaches, holds that, while Catholics are called to the fullness of divine life in the Church, and have a duty to proclaim the Gospel of Christ, they must also maintain a dialogue with other faiths in a spirit of cooperation and mutual respect.¹⁴ That is to say, though Catholics must hold fast to the truth of Christ, they must also be open to the possibility that God’s grace and divine life are active in other religions. In short, the Church must be in constant dialogue with others, but in a manner which does not foreclose conversion.

12 <https://www.ncregister.com/blog/cardinal-burke-bishop-schneider-criticism-of-errors-is-fidelity-to-the-pope>

13 See http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/audiences/2019/documents/papa-francesco_20190403_udienza-generale.html

14 For an excellent discussion of the way in which a ‘deep listening’, inspired by the *Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius of Loyola*, can facilitate dialogue with other faiths, see Michael Barnes SJ, *Ignatian Spirituality and Interreligious Dialogue: Reading Love’s Mystery*, Messenger Publications 2021.