

SOTERIOLOGICAL AGNOSTICISM AND INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE*

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Abstract

Christian Theology of Religions since Vatican II has focused primarily on the question of the salvific status of other religions. While it is generally accepted that non-Christians can be saved, there has been disagreement on the role of non-Christian religions in the process of salvation. However, the document *Nostra Aetate* is strikingly silent on that question. I propose that this silence might be taken as a reflection of the fact that one simply cannot, and therefore should not, from within the Christian tradition pass judgment on the salvific efficacy of other religions. This attitude of soteriological agnosticism, however, does not in any way preclude productive and constructive dialogue between religions. On the contrary, it allows Christians to engage the teachings of other religions with the hope of encountering “rays” or elements of truth in that religion, but without worrying about what that might mean for the exclusive salvific claims of Christianity.

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Much of the discussion in the discipline of Theology of Religions since Vatican II has focused on the question of the salvation of non-Christians, and in particular on the status of non-Christian religions as mediators of salvation. This is not surprising considering the centrality of soteriology in Christian thought and practice. And the history of Christian attitudes toward other religions prior to Vatican II has tended to focus on Cyprian's warning that "there is no salvation outside the Church."¹ As such, the value of non-Christian religions has been and continues to be assessed according to blanket and a priori judgments of their salvific power.

One of the remarkable features of Vatican II, however, is that it refrains from general pronouncements on the salvific value of non-Christian religions. This silence has nevertheless led to widespread speculation on the intended or the implicit view of the salvific status of other religions, informing the classical paradigms of exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism. The discussion around the role of other religions in the process of salvation seems to have reached something of an impasse, with different theological positions firmly entrenched, and their implications for interreligious dialogue narrowly defined. In order to move beyond the impasse, I suggest that we return to the silence or agnosticism of the Vatican II documents with regard to the salvific status of other religions and focus instead on the epistemological questions regarding the nature and status of truth in other religions, which *are* discussed on the documents, and on their import for the dialogue between religions.

Salvation Outside the Church

There is little doubt or disagreement about the fact that the Vatican II documents affirm the possibility of salvation outside the Church. *Lumen Gentium*, 16 states emphatically that, "Those who, through no fault of their own, do not know the Gospel of Christ or his Church, but who nevertheless seek God with a sincere heart, and moved by grace, try in their actions to do his will as they know it through the dictates of their conscience — those too may achieve eternal salvation." There is some debate over whether or not this represents a change in the attitude of the Church toward non-Christians. While it seems to

¹As many have pointed out, this third century expression was originally not directed to non-Christians, but rather to heretics and schismatics within the Church. For a helpful overview of the history of the adage, see Gavin D'Costa, "'Extra exxlesiam nulla salus' revisited" in *Religious Pluralism and Unbelief*, ed., Ian Hamnett, London: Routledge, 1990, 130-147.

suggest a radical departure from the traditional adage “extra ecclesiam nulla salus,” the

Church has for centuries allowed for exceptions to this rule, and came to actually condemn individuals (such as Leonard Feeney, SJ) who came to apply the expression in too rigid and literal terms. The Council of Trent (1545-1563) already recognized the possibility of a “baptism of desire” for those who lived a life of holiness without having received actual baptism, and in the document *Singulari Quodam* (1854), Pope Pius IX officially speaks of the reality of “invincible ignorance,” thereby de-culpabilizing those who through no fault of their own had never been exposed to the truth of the Gospel. Hence, one might say that, though the possibility of the salvation of non-Christians was not previously denied, it is only in the documents of Vatican II that it was positively and formally affirmed with what Jacques Dupuis calls “unprecedented assurance.”² This affirmation was itself of course the fruit of considerable prior theological reflection and debate in which theologians such as Karl Rahner and Hans Urs von Balthasar played an important role. Rahner himself referred to the optimism concerning salvation as “one of the most noteworthy results of the Second Vatican Council.”³

While most Catholic theologians have welcomed and applauded the attitude of openness and generosity with regard to the salvation of non-Christians,⁴ some have been more guarded or apprehensive about a purely optimistic interpretation of the documents of Vatican II regarding the salvation of non-Christians. This apprehension is mainly informed by a concern for missionary mandate of the Church. In his book *Will Many Be Saved?* Ralph Martin, for example, calls attention to the fact that the text from *Lumen Gentium*, 16, which affirms the possibility of salvation of all, is immediately qualified by the warning:

But very often, deceived by the Evil One, men have become vain in their reasonings, have exchanged the truth of God for a lie and served the world rather than the Creator (cf. Rom 1:21 and 25). Or else, living and dying in this world without God, they are exposed to ultimate despair.

²Jacques Dupuis, *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism*, Maryknoll: Orbis, 1997, 161.

³In “Observations on the Problem of the ‘Anonymous Christian,’” in *Theological Investigations*, vol 14, New York: Seabury, 1976, 284.

⁴See in particular Gerald O’Collins very helpful survey of Biblical sources supporting the belief in the possibility of universal salvation: *Salvation for All God’s Other Peoples*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.

Hence, to procure the glory of God and the salvation of all these, the Church, mindful of the Lord's command, "preach the Gospel to every creature" (Mk 16:16) takes zealous care to foster the missions.

This passage, Martin believes, undercuts or at least strongly nuances the earlier positive statements in that "'very often' human beings are not living their lives in a way that will lead them to salvation, and there is a real possibility of many being lost unless they are addressed with a call to repentance, faith, and baptism."⁵ For Martin, it is the omission of the Biblical teaching on sin which has stemmed or even halted the missionary zeal of the Church and which "needs to be corrected if the urgent call for a new evangelization is to achieve its considerable promise."⁶

Though this call to a more nuanced or cautious understanding of the possibility of salvation outside the Church has its supporters,⁷ the overall message from the documents is that God's salvific grace is also at work outside the Church. The difference between being inside and being outside the Church is succinctly captured by Wayne Teasdale when he states that "*Nostra Aetate* has an optimism about salvation outside the church but a certainty of salvation within."⁸

Salvation and the Religions

All of this leaves open the question of the role of other religions in the salvation of their followers. Do these religions play a positive and constitutive role in the process of salvation, or are non-Christians saved in spite of their religious traditions? The documents of Vatican II are remarkably silent on this point. They speak in very positive terms about other religions in general and about certain religions in particular. *Nostra Aetate*, while originally intended to correct distorted views of Jews and Judaism, also came to include positive statements about Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism and other religions which "attempt in their own ways to calm the hearts of men by outlining a program of life covering doctrine, moral precepts and sacred rites" (2). The text continues by stating that "The Catholic Church rejects nothing of what is true and holy in these religions. She has a high regard for the manner of life and conduct, the precepts and doctrines

⁵Ralph Martin, *Will Many Be Saved? What Vatican II Actually Teaches and Its Implications for the New Evangelization*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012, 131-132.

⁶Ralph Martin, *Will Many Be Saved?*, 208.

⁷The book was endorsed by a good number of American bishops.

⁸Wayne Teasdale, *Catholicism in Dialogue*, London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2004, 63.

which, although differing in many ways from her own teaching, nevertheless often reflect a ray of that truth which enlightens all men." *Lumen Gentium*, 16 speaks even more explicitly of "the plan of salvation" which includes "that people to which the covenants and the promises were made, and from which Christ was born in the flesh," "those who acknowledge the Creator, in the first place amongst whom are the Moslems" and "those who in shadows and images seek the unknown God." But the documents stop short of explicitly recognizing these religions as "ways of salvation."

This silence of the documents of Vatican II on the salvific role of other religions has opened the door to radically different interpretations. Some, such as Gerald O'Collins, suggest that the documents implicitly affirm other religions as ways to salvation: "To be sure, the Council does not expressly speak of 'ways of revelation and salvation,' but what it says of Islam and, to a lesser extent, Hinduism, Buddhism, and other religions, amounts to recognizing them to be such 'ways' to God."⁹

He qualifies this by saying that this does not mean that other religions are equal or complete ways to salvation, independent or unrelated to the Church. But it is through, and not in spite of their beliefs and practices that these non-Christians are brought closer to God.¹⁰ Jacques Dupuis states a little more cautiously that "Even while much of what the council affirms inclines toward the positive statement, the conclusions are not firmly drawn."¹¹ Others, such as Gavin D'Costa, have interpreted the silence of the documents as an implicit "refusal to acknowledge other religions, *per se*, as possibly being salvific structures."¹² He states that "it may well be the case that the documents' silences are intentional and could be read, as I would suggest, as prohibiting any unqualified positive affirmation of other religions as salvific structures, or as containing divine revelation."¹³

⁹Gerald O'Collins, *The Second Vatican Council on Other Religions*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013, 163.

¹⁰Other theologians arguing for a recognition of other religions as ways of salvation are Piero Rossano in his article in the volume *Christ's Lordship and Religious Pluralism*, ed., Gerald Anderson and Thomas Stransky, Maryknoll: Orbis, 1981, 102-103; and K. Kunnumpuram, *Ways of Salvation: The Salvific Meaning of Non-Christian Religions according to the Teaching of Vatican II*, Poona: Pontifical Atheneum, 1971.

¹¹Jacques Dupuis, *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism*, Maryknoll: Orbis, 1997, 169.

¹²Gavin D'Costa, *The Meeting of Religions and the Trinity*, Maryknoll: Orbis, 2000, 109.

¹³Gavin D'Costa, *The Meeting of Religions and the Trinity*, 105.

D'Costa thus interprets the absence of explicit acknowledgement of other religions as ways of salvation as an implicit negation.¹⁴ This interpretation could be inferred from the fact that the council, while in many respects inspired by the theology of Karl Rahner, did not follow him in referring to other religions as “lawful” and as “a positive means for gaining the right relationship to God and thus for the attaining of salvation, a means which is therefore positively included in God’s plan of salvation.”¹⁵ Paul Knitter, for example, makes much of the fact that the council “did not follow Rahner in expressly concluding that the religions are to be viewed as possible, or probably, “ways of salvation” — instruments by which God draws people to God’s self.”¹⁶

In all this history and development of theological reflection, little or no attention has been paid to the theological significance of the *silence* of the Vatican II documents on the question of the salvific role of non-Christian religions. Knitter admits that the bishops “neither affirmed nor denied that the religions might be actual conduits by which the Spirit flows into the lives of people beyond the Church” and acknowledges that “perhaps the reason they didn’t decide this question was that they deliberately chose not to.”¹⁷ He suggests that this choice may have been informed by the style and intention of the council, which was pastoral, rather than doctrinal. However, I wish to propose that there may also be deeper theological insight and wisdom, whether conscious or not, in refraining from passing judgment on the salvific status of other religions.

Soteriological Agnosticism

There are many sound theological and philosophical reasons for practicing a form of agnosticism with regard to the soteriological function of other religions. From a purely existential perspective, one might first of all argue that it is simply impossible to judge the salvific potential of another religion. One need not go as far as a cultural-linguistic perspective to recognize that one can only speak experientially from and about one’s own religious life and tradition.

¹⁴Other theologians arguing that the texts deny salvific value to other religions are Paul Hacker, *Theological Foundations of Evangelization*, St Augustin: Steyler 1980, 61-77, and Ralph Martin, *Will Many Be Saved?*, 2012.

¹⁵Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, vol. 5, London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1966, 121, 125.

¹⁶Paul Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions*, Maryknoll: Orbis, 2002, 77.

¹⁷Paul Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions*, 77.

Hence, all one can “know” as a Christian is that the ritual and spiritual life of Christianity lead to the experience of salvation. From within a Christian faith perspective, one can neither confidently affirm or deny the possibility of attaining salvation through other religions.

There has been much discussion on the unity or diversity of religious experiences and on the question of whether all religions lead to the same ultimate religious end. While perennial philosophers such as Aldous Huxley¹⁸ and Frithjof Schuon¹⁹ and pluralist theologians as John Hick²⁰ have argued that all religions are based on the same fundamental religious experience and oriented to the same ultimate reality, constructivist philosophers of mysticism as Stephen Katz²¹ and inclusivist theologians as Mark Heim have emphasized the essential relationship between language and experience or between practice and goal, thus emphasizing the distinctiveness of religious experiences and ultimate ends. Those arguing for the oneness of all religious ends tend to regard all particular religious ends as various expressions of the same ultimate reality and goal. They focus mainly on mystical texts and on the fruits of mystical experiences to support this position.²² In his book *Salvations*, Mark Heim counters this argument by focusing on the essential relationship between means and end, or religious practice and ultimate goal. Seeking to preserve “the maximum truth value in the specifics of the traditions”²³ he points out that Jewish religious practice is not oriented toward the Christian understanding of salvation, and the pursuit of moksha or nirvana in Hinduism or Buddhism cannot be simply identified with the desire for salvation in Christianity. Without going into further details of the debate, it is safe to say that the question of the unity or diversity of religious experiences and ends cannot be resolved in purely phenomenological terms. Since ultimate religious experiences are essentially ineffable and the final religious goal by definition eschatological, there is no neutral or historical place from which to compare them.

¹⁸Aldous Huxley, *The Perennial Philosophy*, New York: Harper and Brothers, 1945.

¹⁹Frithjof Schuon, *The Transcendent Unity of Religions*, New York: Harper & Row, 1984.

²⁰John Hick, *God Has Many Names*, London: Macmillan, 1980.

²¹Steven Katz, ed., *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1978.

²²William James' *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1907) was a particularly influential text for all of these thinkers.

²³Mark Heim, *Salvations. Truth and Difference in Religion*, Maryknoll: Orbis, 1999, 145.

While the debate is thus phenomenologically unresolvable, it is natural for religions to seek to assess the value of other religions in terms of their own specific goal. Even Mark Heim developed a theology in which the ends of other religions came to be regarded as penultimate with regard to the Christian religious end, and thus as ultimately oriented toward a Christian understanding of salvation.²⁴ However, the belief that all religions are ultimately oriented to one's own religious end, or that the religious ends of other religions are ultimately subsumed in one's own religious end skirts over the problem of conflicting truth claims or incompatible teachings and practices in other religions. It would be incoherent to state that other religions are entirely or equally ways to salvation when they at times contain teachings and practices opposed to Christianity. And even when teachings and practices appear to be similar to those of Christianity, the broader religious context in which they are embedded often imbues them with meanings which are not always compatible with Christian teachings. As such, even O'Collins, in interpreting the Vatican documents as suggesting that other religions do offer ways to salvation, qualifies this by stating that "this is not the same thing as (a) alleging that they are equally effective at putting people in contact with God, of (b) acknowledging them to be complete and clear ways, equivalent to what God offers through Jesus Christ and the community called into being by the Holy Spirit."²⁵ Hence, from a Christian theological perspective, one cannot unequivocally designate other religions, or even aspects of other religions as ways to salvation. But neither can one simply deny them salvific efficacy. The Bible clearly affirms the universal salvific will of God (1 Tim 2:4), and Karl Rahner's argument about the necessary social and historical nature of salvation²⁶ cannot be easily refuted. Moreover, while religious teachings are indeed coloured by their overall religious context, they often do contain a certain number of moral and religious teachings which are plainly similar or the same as Christianity. To deny any salvific efficacy to other religions would then also be incoherent. Rather than affirming or denying other

²⁴Mark Heim, *The Depth of the Riches. A Trinitarian Theology of Religious Ends*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001.

²⁵Gerald O'Collins, *The Second Vatican Council on Other Religions*, 163.

²⁶Rahner states that "If... man can always have a positive, saving relationship to God, and if he always had to have it, then he always had to have it within *that* religion which in practice was at his disposal by being a factor in his sphere of existence." *Theological Investigations*, vol 5, 126.

religions as ways to salvation, it is thus logically and theologically sound to maintain an attitude of humble ignorance on the question.

The virtue of refraining from judging the salvific potential of other religions in general is not only an expression of humility, but also of prudence. The world of religious diversity is immense, and it would be impossible to make blanket statements about all religions. The religions mentioned in the Vatican II documents (Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, Judaism) represent only a fraction of the existing religions in the world. While these religions have certainly survived the test of time, each contains significant internal diversity and conflict, thus precluding general judgments of these religions as a whole. In addition, there are thousands of old and new religions in the world which cannot be a priori judged ways of salvation, or not. As such, an attitude of agnosticism regarding the salvific value of other religions appears to be existentially, phenomenologically and theologically coherent, without diminishing the possibility and the importance of dialogue with other religions.

Soteriological Agnosticism and Interreligious Dialogue

In keeping the middle between affirming other religions as means of salvation and denying them any salvific power, the documents of Vatican II allow for genuine exploration of the truth of other religions and mutual learning. While the texts do not pass judgment on the salvific power of religions as a whole, they do explicitly affirm the presence of elements of truth and holiness in other religions. *Nostra Aetate*, 2 states unambiguously that: "The Catholic Church rejects nothing of what is true and holy in these religions. She has a high regard for the manner of life and conduct, the precepts and doctrines which, although differing in many ways from her own teaching, nevertheless reflect a ray of that truth which enlightens all men." It is important to emphasize that this text forms the first official recognition by the Church of the presence of truth in other religions. The text goes on to state that,

The Church, therefore, urges her sons to enter with prudence and charity into discussion and collaboration with members of other religions. Let Christians, while witnessing to their own faith and way of life, acknowledge, preserve and encourage the spiritual and moral truths found among non-Christians, also their social life and culture.

Among the conditions for the possibility of dialogue with other religions, recognition of the (possible) presence of truth in the other

religion constitutes both a necessary and a sufficient condition.²⁷ For a religion oriented toward the eschatological fulfilment of the truth and based on the belief in the continuing revelation of truth in history, the very possibility that this truth might reveal itself in other religions ought to propel it to discovering that truth and engaging it in a constructive way. Rather than on the salvific status of other religions, theology of religions might thus focus more explicitly on the epistemological questions regarding the nature and status of truth in other religions, its relationship to Christian truth claims and the process of discerning such truth. Such a shift from soteriological to epistemological questions may also put to rest the ongoing debate over the relationship between Theology of Religions and Comparative Theology. Weary of the endless internal Christian debate over the salvific status of other religions, comparative theologians such as Jim Fredericks and Francis Clooney have argued for the importance of simply engaging the other religion and then possibly determining its truth and value.²⁸ They thus reject the idea that Comparative Theology requires a Theology of Religions. However, if Theology of Religions focuses on the question of truth, rather than salvation, it becomes more evident that any engagement with other religions involves at least some presupposition about the possibility of finding truth in the other religion. Granted, the question whether there actually is truth in another religion and how that truth relates to Christian teachings can only be determined after in fact engaging that tradition. But the two disciplines may then be regarded mutually informing in a constructive way. In bracketing the question of salvation from theology of religions, the simple and inevitable epistemic function of Theology of Religions thus becomes more evident.

One of the critiques of the Vatican II approach to dialogue is its somewhat paternalizing and domesticating attitude to the truth of other religions. While encouraging Christians to enter into “discussion and collaboration” with members of other religions, the text speaks mainly of acknowledging, preserving, and encouraging the truths found in other religions. It does not also speak of *learning from* other religions. However, there are significant resources within

²⁷For a more in-depth discussion of the conditions for dialogue see my *The Impossibility of Interreligious Dialogue*, New York: Crossroad, 2008.

²⁸The most systematic argument for this position may be found in James Fredericks, *Faith among Faiths: Christian Theology and non-Christian Religions*, Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1999.

the Vatican II documents which point to the possibility of a mutually enriching dialogue. First, when referring to other religions, *Nostra Aetate* speaks of precepts and doctrines which “*although differing in many ways from her own teaching, nevertheless often reflect a ray of that truth which enlightens all men.*” This (often missed) clause suggests that other religions may reveal elements of truth which are significantly different from those which the Church already holds, and from which she may thus learn.

Second, in so far as the possibility of learning from other religions requires a certain degree of humility about one’s own understanding of the truth, the Vatican document *Dei Verbum*, 8 states that “the Church is always advancing toward the plenitude of divine truth, until eventually the words of God are fulfilled in her.” This eschatological understanding of the truth thus allows for the possibility of growth, including through dialogue with other religions. It is thus not surprising that later Vatican documents, such as *Dialogue and Proclamation* (1990), become more explicit about the possibility of learning from other religions:

The fullness of truth received in Jesus Christ does not give individual Christian the guarantee that they have grasped that truth fully. In the last analysis truth is not a thing we possess but a person by whom we must allow ourselves to be possessed. This is an unending process. While keeping their identity intact, Christians must be prepared to learn and to receive from and through others the positive value of their tradition (49).

Since Vatican II, Catholics have indeed been actively engaged in all types of interreligious dialogue, from the summoning of religious leaders to pray for peace (in Assisi) to the official founding of a monastic interreligious dialogue (DIM/MID), and from various forms of grassroots initiatives to the development of new theological disciplines devoted to dialogue with particular religions (Comparative Theology). All of this has been possible without a clear and definitive pronouncement on the salvific status of other religions.

Conclusion

While some have lamented the reticence of Vatican II in taking a position on the salvific value of other religions, I believe that this reserve reflects a theological and a practical wisdom which is still to be fully appreciated and explored. To pronounce other religions as ways of salvation would have contradicted the self-understanding of those religions while also overstepping the boundaries of what one might claim to know theologically. The Church unambiguously

affirms the possibility of salvation outside the Church. But what the particular role is of the religions in this process of salvation would be impossible to assess from within the theological purview of a particular religion. One may hope and even expect that God uses the religions to lead their respective followers to the ultimate and eternal goal. But to make a blanket statement about this would be both presumptuous and unnecessary for genuine dialogue to take place.

A shift away from the question of the salvific nature of non-Christian religions to their potential for revealing divine truth might moreover set a clearer and more crisp agenda for the discipline of Theology of Religions and establish its proper, and necessary place in relation to Comparative Theology.