

## RELIGIOUS PLURALISM, *DE FACTO* AND *DE IURE*: AN INDIAN APPRAISAL OF VATICAN II

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### Abstract

Pluralism, pluriformity and synodality have become often-mentioned jargons in the post-modern religious context. The narrow, exclusive, yet necessitated axiom, namely, *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* of Origin of Alexandria, Cyprian of Carthage, which although intended for schismatics and heretics originally, was understood rigidly from the fifth to the fifteenth century in the documents of popes and councils. The Council of Florence declared that all outside the Catholic Church, be it pagans, heretics, Jews, or schismatics, will not have a share in eternity. On the contrary, they will go to the “everlasting fire which was prepared for the devil and his angels,” if not joined the church before death. Such a notion was defended by Pope Pius IX in *Singulari Quadam* (1854), stating clearly that everyone outside the Catholic Church will have no salvation. The Second Vatican Council, a metamorphosis wherein the Church did not define any new doctrine but exemplified a dialogical pilgrimage, called for a renewed vision of other religions *in our time* (*Nostra Aetate*). *Periti* from both theology and history backgrounds consider the Vatican II standpoint as a breakthrough and a conclusion for the recurring search for *Vera Religione*. This paper will evaluate religious pluralism from a Catholic point of view in line with Vatican II and post-Vatican II teachings and would affirm that it is *de facto* and *de iure* in the contemporary global

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context. Although 'dialogue' and 'dialogical' became the new paradigm in which the church should pilgrimage with the new conciliar vision, on account of both misinterpretation and reinterpretation, the new enthusiasm has been skillfully downplayed in the post-Vatican II period. Thus, this paper will unfold the fact that the 'envisioned dialogue' has remained in the conciliar documents alone, at least in the Indian context, wherein religious pluralism is *de facto* and *de iure*.

**Keywords:** Religious Pluralism, Vatican II, *Nostra Aetate*, Interreligious Dialogue *Extra Ecclesiam Nulla Salus*, Indian Context, *De facto* and *De iure*

### Context of the Study

India has been a land of different religions since ancient times. While Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism originated in India, religions like Christianity, Judaism and Islam, though brought in later, became an integral part of the cultural, social and ritualistic history of India. Religious pluralism, albeit a reality, there existed a noticeable commonality and co-existence between different religious groups, sharing values, cultural and social practices. "Religious pluralism is thus the keynote of Indian culture and religious tolerance is the very foundation of Indian secularism. Religious secularism is based on the belief that all religions are equally good and that they all lead to the same goal of realisation of God."<sup>1</sup> Religious tolerance was the hallmark of Indian culture, and religious leaders were real spiritual leaders. Thus, there existed a mutual sharing of religious values. Despite one's religious adherence, they not only respected good elements in other religions but were open to listen to the noble religious practices in other religions. However, in the course of time, religious fundamentalism and mixing of politics with religion significantly disrupted the religious harmony and co-existence. Though fundamentalism is a global phenomenon, not only in the religious sphere, we will also only deal with religious fundamentalism as it alone sets the context of this study. Fundamentalism, be it in Christianity or in any other religion, is a threat and a hindrance to peaceful co-existence. A number of factors, such as too much exclusivism, misunderstanding and misinterpretation of the universal salvific will of God, disproportionality between the letter and spirit,

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<sup>1</sup> Religious Pluralism in India: as Fact and Value. <https://egyankosh.ac.in/bitstream/123456789/21694/1/Unit-17.pdf> (accessed 9 January, 2026).

narrow-mindedness, unreasonable propaganda, etc., are involved in the origin and development of religious fundamentalism. Pope Francis rightly said that “Fundamentalism is a disease of all religions...[It] is always a tragedy. It is not religious, it lacks God, it is idolatrous.”<sup>2</sup>

A number of biblical accounts and fathers of the church testify that the Bible maintained a positive attitude about other religions. Though there are various kinds of materials with regard to the value and role of other religions in the Bible, it is also true that there are no comprehensive methods suggested for Christianity’s relationship to non-Christian religions, but some leads.<sup>3</sup> On the one hand, biblical religion was deeply rooted in the religions of the cultures surrounding Israel. Judaism did not begin as a fixed and autonomous religion but borrowed from “pagan” religions. On the other hand, as Israel’s self-consciousness sharpened, other religions were judged during the Old Testament times as worthless idolatries and challenges to the worship of Yahweh. In the New Testament, there are only certain passing references to some Greco-Roman religions, and it does not address the challenge of other religions. As a whole, when the New Testament refers to other religions, the verdict is usually negative; other religions are regarded as futile. On the contrary, the Pauline writings regard even pagan religions as potential sources of a general kind of knowledge of God. In the Old Testament, there are varying assessments of individual gentiles, non-Jewish people who were outside the covenant community. In fact, there are hostile attitudes toward and even ridicule of their worship of idols, just as also positive, admiring appraisals. Though generally, the Bible offers quite consistent negative judgment of other religions and thus maintains an exclusive attitude, a range of biblical passages point to the relative value of other religions and to God’s power in transforming religions and cultures to acknowledge the truth. In fact, Israelites themselves originally followed Henotheism and gradually embraced monotheism and then universalism.<sup>4</sup> The contrasting viewpoints in the Bible offer theologians and the magisterium the opportunity to develop this

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<sup>2</sup> Pope Francis, Catholic News Service, <https://www.ndtv.com/world-news/pope-says-fundamentalism-is-disease-of-all-religions-1249628> (9 January 2026).

<sup>3</sup> Donald Senior and Carroll Stuhlmueller, *The Biblical Foundations for Mission* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1983), 345.

<sup>4</sup> Antony Edanad, *God-World-Man: Towards an Integral View of Divine Revelation* (Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 2010), 48.

biblical opening and thus develop a theology of religions in the changed circumstances. Obviously, in the gospels, Acts of the Apostles and the Pauline Letters, Jesus is the central figure, whose attitude played a significant role throughout the New Testament period. Though Jesus of Nazareth definitely limited his ministry to the covenant community, he reached out at times to the people outside the household of Israel's God as Jacques Dupuis summarises it; "clearly, then, for Jesus, saving faith is not only remotely accessible to pagans and foreigners; it is actually operative among them. So too foreigners may already belong to the kingdom of God, the call to which extends beyond the limits of Israel's chosen people. This attitude seems to contrast sharply with Jesus' professed admission-recorded earlier-of having been sent "only for the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Mt 15:24).<sup>5</sup>

During the first centuries of its existence, Christianity was very much a minority religion in a vast non-Christian world. Naturally it was subject to pressures from other dominating religious traditions and political powers of the time. The attitude of the early church towards other religions was, on the whole, one of defense, though we do come across some of the most generous recognitions of the work of God outside Christianity. Its most outstanding representatives are Justin, Irenaeus of Lyon, and Clement of Alexandria. Justin has intelligently made use of the Stoic and Platonic philosophies for the purpose of apologetics and defended Christianity, taking John 1: 14 as the key text. He argued that the same Logos that was known by pagan philosophers had now appeared in the form of Jesus of Nazareth. According to Justin, philosophers taught us that the reason in every human being participates in the universal Logos; Justin also argues that in the gospel of John, we learn that in Jesus Christ the Logos became flesh. Therefore, whenever people use their reason, Christ, the Logos, is already at work. "We have been taught that Christ is the first-born of God, and we have declared...that he is the Word of whom every race of men were partaken, and those who lived reasonably are Christians, even though they have been thought atheists" (First Apology 46, 1-4). In Jesus, Christians have full access to the meaning of the Logos, while the pagans have only partial access to it. The technical term these early Apologists used to describe this was *logos spermatikos*; the divine Logos sowed seeds throughout human history; therefore, Christ is known to some extent by non-Christians. While the

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<sup>5</sup> Jaques Dupuis, *Towards a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1997), 34.

Logos manifested itself partially in the pre-Christian philosophic traditions, for us (Christians) who have known it in its incarnation, it has been revealed entirely. In his major work *Adversus Haereses*, Irenaeus spoke about the hope for those who lived before the coming of Christ. The Logos has revealed itself to human beings and has been present to them prior to incarnation. He mentions, “for it was not merely for those who believed on Him in the time of Tiberius Caesar that Christ came, nor did the Father exercise His providence for the men only who are not alive, but for all men altogether, who from the beginning, according to their capacity, in their generation have both feared and loved God and practiced justice and piety towards their neighbors, and have earnestly desired to see Christ, and to hear His voice.”<sup>6</sup> The last phrase, “hear his voice” obviously refers to the people of Israel, who looked for the coming of the Messiah. But it can also be taken, as Francis S. Sullivan mentions, as a reference to gentiles who had come to believe in God as savior and thus could be said to have longed implicitly for the coming of Christ.<sup>7</sup> Clement of Alexandria, a teacher of the church, well-versed in Greek thought, affirmed that God has care for all, since he is the Lord of all, and that he is “the savior of all.” It was his firm conviction that “it cannot be said that he is savior of these, and not of others”: he is the savior of all. God has distributed “his blessings both to Greeks and to barbarians, and in their own time those were called who were predestined to be among the elect.” In his work the *Stromata* (Patchwork), he makes the following observations. The divine Logos was known beyond the boundaries of the Judeo-Christian tradition: “By reflection and direct vision, those among the Greeks who have philosophised accurately see God.”<sup>8</sup>

### *Extra Ecclesiam Nulla Salus*

Irenaeus, in general tolerant towards other religions, as we have already seen, also said against the separatists that it is only “where the church is” that the “spirit of God” is and, consequently, the “church and all grace” (*Against Heresies*, 3, 24. 1). Similarly, Origen maintained that only those in the “house of Rahab, the prostitute,” could be saved (In *Jesu Nave homiliae*, xxvi 3. 5). Ignatius of Antioch in the similar line said, “Be not deceived, my brethren: if anyone follows a maker of schism, he does not inherit the kingdom of God; if anyone walks in strange doctrine, he has no part in the passion” (*To the Philadelphians*,

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<sup>6</sup> Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies* (*Adversus Haereses*), 4.22.2.

<sup>7</sup> Francis A Sullivan, *Salvation Outside the Church? Tracing the History of the Catholic Response* (New York: Paulist Press, 1992), 16.

<sup>8</sup> Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata*, I.19.

3: 3). Thus, among the fathers, there was often a more positive attitude about the possibility of salvation for both Jews and gentiles who had lived before Christ than is evident among later theologians. Yet the fathers denied the possibility of salvation for those Christians who caused schism in the Catholic Church. The classic often quoted pronouncement comes from Cyprian, bishop of Carthage in North Africa and the great writer of *The Unity of the Catholic Church*. Referring to Schismatics, he says bluntly, "for they cannot live outside, since there is only one house of God, and there can be no salvation for anyone except in the church" (Letter 4.4, in *Letters*, 1-81). It was only toward the end of the fourth century, when Christianity had become the official state religion, that the axiom "no salvation outside the church" was applied to pagans and Jews. Resultantly, Ambrose of Milan said, "If anyone does not believe in Christ, he defrauds himself of this universal benefit, just as of someone were to shut out the rays of the sun by closing his windows" (Psalm 118, *Sermon* 8:57). John Chrysostom held an extreme position stating that the pagans have no excuse of ignorance, as Christ has unveiled the mysteries to all. It is in this context, Cyprian's orthodox and traditional teaching of *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* ("...there is no salvation outside the Church...") evolved. Cyprian's quote, which was considered to be root of the so called 'ecclesiocentric view' of salvation needed an appraisal of the context and a critical evaluation of its ongoing interpretations in the course of the history of the Church. We cannot negate the pagan and interreligious context apart from "the ecclesiastical upheavals and disputes" where Cyprian found it necessary to defend Christian faith. Augustine has maintained an exclusive mentality on account of the biblical teaching, Jesus Christ is the only savior (Acts 4: 12) and therefore faith and baptism are necessary for salvation (Mk 16: 15-16, Jn 3: 5). Similarly, if sacraments also are mandatory for salvation, then the church also is necessary. The first authoritative ratification of the Augustinian exclusive principles comes from Pope Innocent III, stating that, "one church...the holy Roman Catholic and apostolic Church, outside of which we believe that no one is saved." We have its updated form in the Fourth Lateran Council (1215), "one indeed is the universal church of the faithful, outside which no one at all is saved." The council also affirmed that no priest other than one consecrated by the church is eligible to conduct the sacramental sacrifice, the mass. These statements are reflections of Cyprian's statement that "there is no salvation outside the church." Thomas Aquinas firmly endorsed the teaching of the fourth Lateran Council and the principle of salvation in the church alone. Making use of the

father's ancient allegorical exegesis, Aquinas affirmed that, "outside the Church there is no salvation; it is like Noah's ark at the time of the flood" (*Summa theologiae* III, Q. 73.A.3). The weightiest document in this series ratifying the Augustinian exclusivism is that of Pope Boniface VIII, in his *Unum Sanctam* (One and Holy) in 1302, which speaks about one, holy and apostolic church which we firmly believe and sincerely confess and that outside of this church there is neither salvation nor the remission of sins. The Jesuits of the 16th and 17th centuries continued the tradition of *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* with great theologians and teachers of the church such as Francis Xavier and Robert Bellarmine. Subsequent declarations in this line are the Profession of Faith of the Council of Trent by Pope Pius IV, *Singulari quadam* of Pope Pius IX and the encyclical *Ubi primum* of Pope Leo XII. Leo XII, Gregory XVI and Pius IX harshly condemned the spirit of "indifferentism" with regard to holding traditional doctrine of exclusivism as a result of the emerging liberalism. Vatican I gave the final authoritative and irrevocable endorsement of the Augustinian axiom by affirming again that no one can be saved outside the church. Later, in 1943, Pope Pius XII, in his influential ecclesiological encyclical *Mystici corporis*, taught that salvation is to be found in the Catholic Church, as the church is the mystical body. Vatican II in general and *Nostra aetate* in particular is a progressive step of reinterpreting this exclusivism and thus is a benchmark in the field of theology of religions as it clearly teaches that "the Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in these religions" (*Nostra Aetate* § 2).

### Vatican II and Religious Pluralism

The sixteen documents of the Second Vatican Council are the results of a metamorphic struggle which each of them underwent in their own ways during the preparatory period of the council. While a few of them, such as *Dei verbum*, *Gaudium et spes*, *Nostra aetate*, etc., were not at all in the proposed agenda, the evolution and their emergence were considered a providential intervention of the Holy Spirit. Pointing to the evolution history of the conciliar documents in the preparatory period of the council, Francis Holland states that "the history of the development of *Dei verbum* parallels the course of the Council itself."<sup>9</sup> From nothingness to the Christian-Jewish link and

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<sup>9</sup> Francis Holland, "Dei verbum: Its Historic Break from Curial "Theology" And Its Subsequent Official Use," in *Vatican II Forty Years Later*, ed. William Madges (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2005), 114.

from there to other religions is the history of the genesis of *Nostra aetate*.<sup>10</sup> The shift from *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* to a Christocentric inclusivism was not easy and came without threats from within the Catholic theological circle, because of opposing theological viewpoints. Cardinal Bea's comment that "the tiny mustard seed of Jules Isaac's half-hour conversation with Good Pope John grew into the large tree that warmly hosts in its branches so many men and women of "non-Christian religions"<sup>11</sup> typically portrays the birth pang of the declaration.

One of the often-asked questions in my classes on interreligious dialogue and theology of religions, very specifically when I analyse the Vatican II standpoint on other religions, is whether the so-called non-Christians accept the conciliar teachings about other religions. For though the church has updated her understanding and acknowledged the rays of truth in other religions, the conciliar view, at its core, is to acknowledge eventually the Truth which is Jesus Christ alone. The issue at stake here is that we reduce "other religious expression within the ambit of one's religious position."<sup>12</sup> An analysis of relevant articles from *Nostra Aetate*, *Lumen Gentium*, *Ad gentes*, *Gaudium et Spes* and *Dei verbum* will explicate this fact. The first article of NA itself affirms that its intention is not to compromise the fundamental teaching that Jesus Christ alone as the revelation of God, but to highlight those things that would promote unity between religions. Humanity as a whole attempts to counter certain obscure riddles, and different religions are in diverse ways the results of such a pursuit of truths. *Nostra Aetate* in § 2 further affirms that the people of all times perceive the presence of an "unseen force," and religions in their ways explicate this unseen force. Given the objective of this document, namely, finding the commonality between religions, can we, on the other hand, admit that the document deliberately overlooked an in-depth study of the God-concept and spirituality of other religions? For when it mentions the non-Abrahamic religions, the aforementioned article calls these religions "various ways" striving to solve human anxiety in their own "ways."<sup>13</sup> Its reference to

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<sup>10</sup> Thomas Stransky, The Genesis of 'Nostra aetate,' <https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2005/10/24/genesis-nostra-aetate/> (accessed 8 January 2026).

<sup>11</sup> Stransky, The Genesis of 'Nostra aetate.'

<sup>12</sup> Pamhor Thumra, "Contemporary Response to the Issues and Challenges of Religious Pluralism and Interfaith Relations: A Perennialist Methodological Appraisal," *ABS Journal of Theology*, vol. 12, no. 1 (June 2024-October 2024) 57-76, 59.

<sup>13</sup> Jacques Scheuer, "The Dialogue with the Traditions of India and the Far East" in *Gregorianum*, 2006, Vol. 87, No. 4 (2006) 797-809, 799.

Hinduism is very general and limited, though, in fact, it is rich and complex with its diverse traditions.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, when NA mentions the Abrahamic religions, the decree gives adequate importance to those parallel concepts between Christianity, Islam and Judaism. Particularly when it speaks about Judaism, the decree affirms that the Christians and Jews have “a common spiritual heritage” (§ 4). However, while the same article admits the presence of “truth and holiness” in these religions, it does not intelligently pinpoint the source of truth and holiness as these religions themselves but, on the contrary, affirms that they are from Christ.<sup>15</sup> It is surprising to note that the council, while urging the necessity to proclaim Christ, is silent about the necessity of baptism and the role of the church in this regard.<sup>16</sup> In this regard, the council silently epitomises Rahner’s *Anonymous Christian*, Panikkar’s *Unknown Christ of Hinduism* and Samartha’s *One Christ Many Religions*. *Lumen gentium* § 16 is much more particular and definite and makes a distinction between the Abrahamic and non-Abrahamic religions, as they will all be saved by God’s single economy of salvation. Furthermore, it adds that “whatever good or truth is found amongst them is considered by the church to be a preparation for the gospel and given by him who enlightens all men.” However, ambiguity and tension regarding what is revealed to those outside the visible boundaries of the Church still remain. *Ad gentes* § 3, 9 and 11, in a similar line, though ambiguous, argue that the non-Christian religions have “the seeds of the word which lie hidden among them,” and acknowledge the “elements of truth and grace...found among peoples...which are, as it were, a secret presence of God.” However, it definitively teaches that God’s universal salvific will does not exclude anyone, and those elements of truth and grace in these religions are “a preparation for the Gospel.” *Gaudium et Spes* § 22 teaches that the Holy Spirit “in a manner known only to God offers to every man the possibility of being associated with this paschal mystery.” In this way, the document clarifies that the Holy Spirit is working in and through these non-Christian religions.

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<sup>14</sup> Martin Ganeri, “Catholic Encounter with Hindus in the Twentieth Century in Search of an Indian Christianity,” in *New Blackfriars*, Vol. 88, No. 1016 (July 2007), 410-432, 412.

<sup>15</sup> Gavin D’ Costa, “*Nostra Aetate* – Telling God’s Story in Asia: Promises and Pitfalls,” in *Vatican II and Its Legacy*, ed. Matthijs Lamberigts and Leo Kenis (Leuven: Leuven University Press and Peeters, 2002), 331.

<sup>16</sup> Agnes M. Brazal, “Dialogue and Proclamation of Truth: Reception of *Nostra Aetate* and *Ad Gentes* by the FABC,” *Journal of Dharma* 42, 4 (October-December 2017), 411-434, 417.

*Dei verbum*, the dogmatic constitution on divine revelation, is all set, through § 4, 6 and 7, to teach that God's self-revelation in and through Jesus Christ is intended and meant for all human beings, irrespective of one's religious adherence. John Paul II's *Redemptoris Missio* § 9 and 10 not only exhorts the real possibility of salvation in Christ for all mankind and the necessity of the Church for salvation but also affirms that the non-Christians share grace which comes from Christ.

On account of the aforementioned documents, one can easily delineate the fact that the council accentuated inclusivism, namely, salvation for all in and through Jesus Christ. However, the Bible accounts both exclusivism and inclusivism.<sup>17</sup> While the gospel of Mark 16: 16 exclusively states that "whoever believes and is baptized will be saved; whoever does not believe will be condemned," I Timothy 2: 4 inclusively affirms that "[God] wills everyone to be saved, and to come to knowledge of the truth." The post-Vatican II period, on account of this renewed understanding of the Church's relation to non-Christians, witnessed a new enthusiasm for (interreligious) dialogue. One should also accept that there were/are also misinterpretations and even distortions of the conciliar teachings. For example, Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre argued that Vatican II made the missionary work pointless.<sup>18</sup> A number of theologians were also either punished or censured for taking extreme positions in the light of conciliar teachings. While Jacques Dupuis was investigated and suspended for his book, entitled *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism*, where he suggested that God's presence and salvific will could be found within other religious traditions themselves, Tissa Balasuriya, a Sri Lankan priest, was criticised for contextualising Christianity in the multi-religious Asian landscape. While Roger Haight, an American theologian was censured for arguing that Christ should be viewed as a "normative" rather than "exclusive" mediator of salvation to facilitate dialogue with other faiths in his book *Jesus Symbol of God*, Paul Knitter, a leading proponent of the pluralist model was criticised for his work, *No Other Name?* wherein he proposed that a "theocentric" (God-centered) rather than "Christocentric" approach was necessary for interreligious peace. It is the essential context of *Dominus Iesus* from the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith in the

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<sup>17</sup> Rory Fox, "Did Vatican II Change the Doctrine 'No Salvation Outside the Church'?" <https://catholicstand.com/did-vatican-ii-change-the-doctrine-no-salvation-outside-the-church/#:~:text=In%20the%20years%20following%20Vatican,Paul%20II%20in%20Dominus%20Iesus> (accessed 2 January, 2026).

<sup>18</sup> Marcel Lefebvre, *Against the Heresies* (Missouri: Angelus Press, 1997), Ch. 8.

year 2000. Accordingly, the post-Vatican II period witnessed a number of relativistic theories that endangered the Church's constant missionary proclamation. Because these theories justified religious pluralism (not only *de facto* but also *de iure*), certain foundational truths in the Catholic Church have been superseded. These presuppositions, of which some are theological and others philosophical in nature, hindered the acceptance and understanding of the revealed truth (DI § 4).

### **An Appraisal of Vatican II's Standpoint on non-Christians in India**

Having assessed the contemporary Indian context and the history of the Church's evolving standpoint, starting from the Bible, Fathers of the Church, and particularly the metamorphosis since Vatican II, now we analyse the reception of Vatican II's paradigm shift in the Indian context. If we summarise the spirit of all sixteen documents of Vatican II, a single word that has a lasting significance is 'dialogue.' Not only has the Church become dialogical (which presupposes initiative and openness), but the council envisaged a radical reorientation of her theology and praxis, basing dialogue as its foundation. Such a reorientation was reflected in her ecclesiology, liturgy, her updated understanding of revelation, scripture, tradition, the magisterium, non-Christians, and ecumenism; in presenting herself not as a stumbling block to modernity; in her renewed understanding of mission; etc. However, an appraisal in our times requires facts and figures rather than certain abstract affirmations. Primarily, it should be analysed against the context of religious pluralism, *de facto* and *de iure* in India. Unlike the European and American contexts, India has always maintained a pluriformity. The call for mutual respect and harmonious living, the primordial challenge of *Nostra aetate* had been practiced in India prior to Vatican II, as I have already observed it. However, Vatican II engendered a new enthusiasm for interreligious dialogue and ecumenism. Among the four forms of dialogue proposed by the Secretariat for Non-Christians in the year 1984, entitled *Dialogue and Mission*, two, namely, dialogue of life and dialogue of action, knowingly or unknowingly, were part of Indian religious life. The other two, namely, dialogue of religious experience and dialogue of theological exchange, on the other hand, offered a new momentum for the already existing harmonious living of religions. A number of interreligious centres were inaugurated for the latter forms of interreligious dialogues. Among many conferences organised to evaluate and implement *Nostra Aetate*, *Bandhavya*, a program organised by the Karnataka

Regional Interreligious Dialogue Commission on 28 October, 2025, to commemorate the 60th anniversary of *Nostra Aetate*, deserves a special mention, as it once again reaffirmed the Church’s openness and inclusivity.<sup>19</sup> The Federation of Asian Bishops Conference (FABC) has translated and extended the new conciliar enthusiasm for dialogue to triple dialogue, namely, with religions, cultures and the poor.<sup>20</sup> It has had a lasting impact on the theology and praxis of the Syro-Malabar and Syro-Malankara churches, which have claimed a fusion of Indian spirituality with Christian theology. Seminaries and religious centres of learning included interreligious dialogue in their academic curriculum and ensured its praxis as part of their formation.<sup>21</sup> All four post-Vatican II popes who accentuated the importance of Vatican II, very specifically its paradigm shift in understanding non-Christians, have had an ongoing impact in India. While Pope John Paul II called for mutual understanding and respect through brotherly dialogues, pope Benedict XVI reinforced the church’s role in building bridges. While pope Francis urged Christians to engage in open and respectful dialogue, pope Leo XIV pointed out the heritage the Christians and the Jews share and called for mutual understanding and reciprocal collaboration with other religions.<sup>22</sup>

One should also accept that the enthusiasm for dialogue and inculturation that existed in the immediate post-Vatican II period has gradually deteriorated lately. The reason for such a phenomenon, as I understand it, is twofold. Primarily, the ordinary faithful are unaware of the conciliar teachings and thus the official standpoint of the catholic church concerning other religions.<sup>23</sup> They are on the contrary attracted to popular piety and preaching which assess other religions as demonic and thereby develop a hatred for them. The invitation of

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<sup>19</sup> <https://catholicconnect.in/news/interfaith-leaders-unite-in-karnataka-to-mark-60-years-of-nostra-aetate> (accessed 11 January, 2026).

<sup>20</sup> Agnes M. Brazal, “Dialogue and Proclamation of Truth: Reception of *Nostra Aetate* and *Ad Gentes* by the FABC,” 411.

<sup>21</sup> Teresa Joseph, “The Spirit of *Nostra Aetate* penetrates the Indian Landscape,” *The Examiner*, Oct 26-nov 1, 2013.

<sup>22</sup> Pope Leo XIV, *Address of the Holy Father to Representatives of Other Churches and Ecclesial Communities*,

and Other Religions, 2025, Pope Francis, *On the Occasion of the 50TH Anniversary of the Promulgation of the Conciliar Declaration “Nostra aetate”* 2015, Pope benedict XVI, *Ecclesia in Medio Oriente*, 2012, Pope John Paul II, *General Audience*, 21 April 1999.

<sup>23</sup> The comments below the Malayalam interview with a researcher on *Nostra Aetate*, in the presence of Cardinal George Koovakatt, the prefect of the Dicastery for interreligious dialogue, testify it. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=um8CPPsNPDs> (accessed 12 January 2026).

*Nostra aetate* to embrace those truths and goodness in other religion, acknowledge those that would promote unity and love and what human beings have in common, having the same origin and destiny are not substantially taught in our catechism and formation. On the contrary, oftentimes, what separates and exclusivises are given undue importance. Another equally significant reason is that, the so called call for dialogue and being dialogical is a misnomer in the catholic theology and life. If Vatican II highlighted a God who sought human beings' company and considered them as friends and dialogue partners (DV § 2), a number magisterial documents and theologians inordinately presented a theoretical God, who dwells in unapproachable light (CCC § 52). Consequently, the number of people who follow atheism and rationalism are seemingly increasing. Thus, if the former phenomenon was out of ignorance, the latter is out of meaninglessness and insignificance. Additionally, people learnt to live without the structures of religion and a supernatural God, especially in the post-Covid, and we witness the rise of 'Religious Nones' among the younger generations.

Dialogue takes place only when two parties are willing to learn from each other, respect each other and open up each other. As a matter of fact, dialogue takes place between the equals. *Nostra aetate* did not express any sense of superiority of Christianity over other religions or list out the negatives of other religious traditions.<sup>24</sup> While it highlighted only the positive elements in other religions and is silent about their core God-concept and theology, in view of promoting dialogue, *Dominus Iesus* and Joseph Ratzinger superimposed the absolute nature of Christian faith, accentuated them as definite revealed truths,<sup>25</sup> and thereby emphasized the necessary purification of other religions, if not exorcism, to dialogue with them. The objective of interreligious dialogue which as we have already analyzed, meant for opening up and exchange between religions, according to Vatican II and post-Vatican II documents, now has become part of the church's evangelizing mission in *Dominus Iesus* and the anchored equality is in personal dignity alone. It states, "Inter-religious dialogue, therefore, as part of her evangelizing mission, is just one of the actions of the

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<sup>24</sup> Enrico Beltramini, "Indian Religions in the Roman Catholics' Gaze: 1920-1965." <https://rupkatha.com/roman-catholics-gaze-1920-1965/> (accessed 12 January, 2026).

<sup>25</sup> Joseph Ratzinger, "Angesichts der Welt von heute. Überlegungen zur Konfrontation mit der Kirche im Schema XIII" in *Wort und Wahrheit* 20 (1965) 493-504.

Church in her mission *ad gentes*. Equality, which is a presupposition of inter-religious dialogue, refers to the equal personal dignity of the parties in dialogue [alone]" (DI § 22). Consequently, non-Christians in India are skeptic and indifferent towards not only evangelization (wherein we are mandated to give Christ), but also about our initiatives for interreligious dialogues (wherein we open up and exchange).

Though the document prompts Christians to undertake a few practical measures after addressing each religion, no substantial efforts are evident in India in this regard. Of course, seminaries and training centres have included basic lessons of other religions in their curriculum. *Nostra aetate* exhorts Christians to "recognize, preserve and promote the good things, spiritual and moral, as well as the socio-cultural values found among [Hinduism and Buddhism]" (NA § 2). In reference to Muslims, "this sacred synod urges [Christians] to forget the past and to work sincerely for mutual understanding and to preserve as well as to promote together for the benefit of all mankind social justice and moral welfare, as well as peace and freedom" (NA § 3). Referring to Judaism, "this sacred synod wants [Christians] to foster and recommend that mutual understanding and respect which is the fruit, above all, of biblical and theological studies as well as of fraternal dialogues." Finally, it advises all Christians that there shall be no "discrimination between man and man or people and people, so far as their human dignity and the rights flowing from it are concerned" as all are created in the image of God. Furthermore, "the Church reproves, as foreign to the mind of Christ, any discrimination against men or harassment of them because of their race, color, condition of life, or religion. On the contrary, following in the footsteps of the holy Apostles Peter and Paul, this sacred synod ardently implores the Christian faithful to "maintain good fellowship among the nations" (1 Peter 2:12), and, if possible, to live for their part in peace with all men, so that they may truly be sons of the Father who is in heaven" (NA § 5). On account of these practical measures, the council exhorts that the Christian life should not be limited to oneself alone, but should be open to recognize, preserve, promote, foster mutual understanding, with other religions and work together for social justice and moral good. As all are created in God's image, human dignity and rights should be ensured at all costs. Thus, the true Christian life should not be exclusivistic but should include 'listening and learning' from each other, especially in India, where there is religious pluralism, *de facto* and *de iure*.

## Concluding Remarks

The initial enthusiasm to learn from other religions and to engage in interreligious dialogue is gradually deteriorating on account of varied aforementioned reasons. The passion for learning from other religions was very much alive in the pre-Vatican II period as well. A number of people, namely Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Keshub Chunder Sen, Brahmabandhab Upadhyaya, Abbe Jules Monchanin, and Swami Abhishiktānanda, attempted to comparatively understand Saccidananda in Hinduism and the Christian concept of the Trinity. Raimundo Panikkar compared and contrasted the Christian concept of Christ and the Hindu concept of Isvara. Sri Aurobindo Ghosh, Dr. Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan and Mahatma Gandhi etc., attempted a comparative study of the doctrine of Avatara in Hinduism and Incarnation in Christianity. Vengal Chakkarai, Pandippedi Chenchiah, and Bishop Aiyadurai Jesudasan Appasamy developed an Indian Christian theology that draws on both Christian and Hindu theological nuances. Generally, they were convinced that a genuine theology of religion is possible only when there is openness and initiative to dialogue. A foreign religion remains foreign if it isn't uprooted and planted in the new soil and culture of a particular country. The primary intention here is not to find those theological and practical elements that would divide and differentiate religions, but to assimilate and have better understanding between them, without compromising one's religious identity. *Nostra Aetate* not only documented the already existing passion to learn from each other but also reinvigorated enthusiasm in this regard, as it, for the first time, prioritised mentioning religions individually and highlighted only the positives in those religions. Moreover, it exhorted Christians to personalise those positive elements, to forget the bygone hostilities and misunderstandings, and thereby to engage in dialogue with them. More such open and broader reflections from the hierarchy would emancipate the interrupted passion to learn from and dialogue with other religions, especially in the post-modern context wherein there is already signs of apatheism, irreligiousness and agnosticism. Ruptures would create confusion, but continuity would open up possibilities and brighten us with hope.