



## Traditions and reception: interpreting Vatican II's 'Declaration on the Church's Relation to Non-Christian Religions'

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### Abstract

I examine the question of how tradition is received and passed on within the Church's Councils with specific attention to the problems of continuity and discontinuity. I use the example of Vatican II's 'Declaration on the Church's Relation to Non-Christian Religions' to explore the question of hermeneutics in both receiving and passing on the teachings of the Church. By looking at the historical development of this document I try to show that three important factors at work: first, the question of biblical interpretation; second, the question of determining which elements of tradition are authoritative and which not; and third, the influence of non-theological factors upon theological articulations. Through examining these factors, I argue for one particular approach to Council hermeneutics that is able to include and correct three other approaches. I argue that correct interpretations of Council documents do not represent the closure of tradition, but the opening up of tradition to future reception and re-formulation.

‘εἴ τις ὑμᾶς εὐαγγελίζεται παρ’ ὃ παρελάβετε, ἀνάθεμα ἔστω.’  
(‘if anyone preaches a version of the Good News different from the one you have already heard, he is to be condemned.’) Galatians 1:9.

### Introduction

During the 1950s – 70s Christian attitudes to the world religions underwent an enormous sea change both theologically and socially. The changes had begun slowly from the eighteenth century. For most of Christian history, with important exceptions, it would be fair to say that three beliefs dominated thinking about non-Christians: they were fundamentally erroneous; salvation was only possible through faith in Christ (*solus Christus*) and/or only through the Church (*extra ecclesiam nulla salus*); and socially, non-Christian religions should not be granted equal civic rights. Since the 1950s all these beliefs

were radically questioned and apparently almost discarded within mainstream Roman Catholic and Orthodox traditions as well as in some Protestant and Reformed communities. First, the positive elements and that which is shared in common between Christianity and other religions is stressed in the official documents of the Catholic Church and the World Council of Churches (WCC: 1977, 2002). Second, the Catholic Church and the World Council of Churches both hold that salvation is possible for those who are non-Christians after the coming of Christ. The Catholic Church emphasise the mediation of the Church and Christ in this process and the World Council of Churches stress the mediation of Christ in all salvation. Third, there is almost no Christian group that would disagree with equal rights for all religions in the public square. How did this change come about? Through 'reception'. The answer is that traditional teachings on these matters were received, interpreted and passed on, sometimes with the claim that these teachings were the old ones, other times that these teachings were recasting the old within a new situation and some simply said these were a selection of the old recast into new teachings. 'Reception' theory for theologians is a Pauline question of whether the Good News is still being preached or whether something has supplanted the gospel. But it is more complicated than a matter of simple repetition, because preaching is a linguistic action which is contextual, and because there are interesting theories, such as John Henry Newman's (1846), about the development of doctrine. Hence, while there are overlaps of concern in 'reception theory' in cultural studies, literature and theology, I contend that theology's particular assumptions generate a unique form of reception theory: passing on the faith that has been received, otherwise facing condemnation as Paul teaches in Galatians 1:9.

To keep some control over an impossibly wide canvass, I am going to focus mainly on the Catholic Church and Catholic theologians to explore the complex dynamics in this reception process. I will focus on the Second Vatican Council (all documents cited from ed. Flannery 1975), convened by Pope John XXIII, which promulgated the 'Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions' ('The Declaration' from now on) in October 1965. 'The Declaration' was deeply controversial. I have chosen this document from a Council because the Catholic Church has some robust rules for the reception of tradition. It was precisely these rules and their employment that became the central factor in the great debates about other religions at the Council: scripture, tradition and magisterial teachings must not be contradicted or the teachings propounded would be inauthentic. This approach (call it X) insists, to use a musical metaphor, that Süßmayr's hand should be invisible in Mozart's unfinished *Requiem*. Another view (call it Y), the majority at the Council as it happens, argued for continuity, but a contextualised appreciation of

earlier teachings, such that not all were universally binding at all times and in all places. Returning to our musical metaphor: we all know that Süßmayr was not Mozart, but tried to finish the *Requiem* keeping with Mozart's style. To group X group Y sounded rather like modernism understood as historical contextualism and relativism. Modernism according to group X had been condemned by Pius XII. To X, Y's strategy sounded like getting a heavy metal rock band to complete Mozart's unfinished *Requiem*: the discontinuity jarred!

There were of course many different interest groups at the Council, not just two, and the debates were complicated. See with delicate balance (Oesterreicher 1968, and Laurentin & Neuner 1966, and Bea 1966); and from a generally 'liberal' view (ed. Alberigo 1995, 1997, 2000, 2003, 2006); and with a careful hermeneutic of past tradition interpreting the present (Levering & Lamb 2008, Marchetto 2010). However, I shall be drawing on the *Coetus Episcoporum Internationalis*, subsequently termed *Coetus*, a group of conservative bishops led by Bishop Carli and Archbishops Lefebvre and Rigaud to represent the minority view, that I called X above (see ed. Alberigo 1997: 195–200; 2003: 515–18; and Lefebvre 1997, 1982; Nemeth 1994) and to represent what I called Y above I draw on writers from the drafting committee and others closely associated with Oesterreicher, Laurentin, Neuner and Bea to represent the 'majority'. Both groups were far from homogenous and the latter fragmented further after the Council. The two 'groups' underline the curious paradox: both claimed the same ends (continuity with the Catholic tradition) and the same means (using the resources of the tradition), but were utterly at loggerheads in their assessment of the Council. Both groups were engaged with reception of the one true faith of the Catholic Church and both groups questioned the validity of the other's doctrinal conclusions. A second painful paradox is that some within the minority group, led by Lefebvre, created schism. In their resolute fidelity to magisterial, Conciliar and scriptural authority they eventually rejected all three, not universally, but in a particular context: the authority of five popes (John XXIII, Paul VI, John Paul I, John Paul II, and Benedict XVI); the authority of the twenty first ecumenical Council, Vatican II (according to the Catholic count); and the authority of scripture which underwrites the pope and the councils in the first two contexts above.

'The Declaration' started life as a document on the Jewish people. Here we see another curious paradox (although some would say a disgrace, and others a wonderful grace): what started as a document on the Jewish people ended up as "The Declaration", which only dealt with Judaism in paragraph 4, in its 5 paragraphs, but also thus attended to the three other world religions (Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism).

## The Jewish question

Slowly, after the *Shoah* there was profound shock amongst European Christians. Six million Jewish men, women and children were systematically exterminated in the heart of Christian Europe by a Christian nation (Germany), while the largest Christian Church in Europe (the Catholic Church) allegedly made no public condemnations of these genocidal actions. While there has been argument as to whether Nazi anti-Semitism is different from Christian anti-Semitism, and whether the Catholic Church remained silent for a greater good (keeping their operations to save Jews intact, or to keep their own faithful intact), there is no question that a long history of Christian anti-Semitism, especially from the thirteenth century on facilitated this horrific genocide (see Foa 2007). Rolf Hockhuth's 1963 play, *The Representative*, staged in Berlin and London in the same year, ignited the European imagination regarding the Catholic complicity question. Hockhuth portrayed Pius XII as avaricious and anti-Semitic. Until Hockhuth's play, there had been little attention to the Jewish question within Catholic circles. This can be seen from the process conducted by the Vatican prior to the Council. Bishops, Catholic Universities and Catholic Institutions world wide were asked for agenda items. The issue of the Jews featured in two returns. In one, eighteen professors from the Pontifical Biblical Institute stressed the need to combat anti-Semitism. In the other, a bishop wanted a condemnation of 'international freemasonry, controlled by the Jews.' (Stransky 1988: 55) Many Jews and a few Catholic theologians had already pointed to Catholic doctrinal and liturgical anti-Semitism as the heart of the problem: the deicide charge made against the Jewish people; the teaching that Judaism, based on the 'Old Covenant', was made null and void with the coming of the 'New Covenant'; the Good Friday prayers that pronounced the Jews 'perfidious' (*perfidii*). Jules Isaac, a Jewish historian, argued this amounted to a 'teaching of contempt' which went against Jesus' teachings (Isaac 1971). Isaac visited Pope John XXIII on June 3, 1960 to plead with him for a change in the teaching of 'contempt'. Isaac left a file with the Pope who handed it to Cardinal Augustin Bea, Secretary for Christian Unity, asking that the teaching of contempt be addressed. Bea, who had a wide network of Jewish contacts in France, Israel and the United States, drafted a short statement *De Judaeis* for the Council. Pope John had already changed the Holy Week 'Solemn Intercessions' in 1959 when he simply dropped *pro perfidies Judaeis* from the usual prayer: 'Let us pray for the perfidious Jews'. He subsequently ordered *perfidies Judaeis* to be dropped universally. Pope Benedict has once more changed this key prayer in the liturgy (2008), to indicate the need for Jewish conversion to Christ, but has excluded any negative reference to the Jewish people: 'Let us also pray for the Jews

that God our Lord should illuminate their hearts, so that they will recognize Jesus Christ, the Saviour of all men.'

The stormy passage of this document is indicative of the issues of 'reception' in three important ways: first, the struggle over the Council text highlights difficulties in biblical hermeneutics; second, we see profound problems in determining which elements of the tradition are authoritative and how to interpret them; and third, we see a growing sensibility to the socio-political impact of theological statements, which perhaps result from the Catholic Church's loss of social power. Let us look at each of these factors.

First, the bible is normative, but its normative meaning requires interpretation. The minority argued that any interpretation must not contradict the main lines of the tradition of interpretation. They argued that the charge of deicide could not be erased for three reasons. First, it was present in the New Testament texts. For example Acts 3:15, established in the Vulgate translation, *Auctorem vitae interfecistis*, 'you have killed the author of life'. Paul confirms this in 1 Thessalonians 2:15, where he says of the Jews 'who killed both the Lord Jesus and the prophets, and drove us out, and displease God and oppose all men.' The Jewish leaders, who represent the people, are undoubtedly guilty, since Jesus himself says in John 15:24 'If I had not done among them the works which no one else did, they would not have sin; but now they have seen and hated both me and my Father.' This also explains John's saying that their Father is the devil (John 8:44). Further, according to the representative theory, where in Hebrew thought a person is always representative of their group, this deicide and its guilt thus passes from generation to generation as Matthew confirms both in Matthew 23: 30–32, and in 27:25 when, during the trial of Jesus, the crowd release Barabbas, taking full representative responsibility for this act: 'And all the people answered, "His blood be on us and on our children."' It is not possible to cover the full range of texts drawn on, but the *Coetus* argued that these theological readings of the bible did not of themselves amount to anti-Semitism for they did not enjoin any persecution of Jews. They simply testified to the drama of sacred history which had to be proclaimed by the Church. Bishop Carli, on behalf of the *Coetus* impressively argued a doctrinal case and carefully distanced himself from any political or racial anti-Semitism (ed. Alberigo 2003: 548ff).

To these biblical arguments were added a second factor, the weight of the tradition in accepting such a continuous line of biblical interpretation. The *Coetus* noted the long line of continuous readings that supported their interpretation of the biblical texts.

Third, socio-political factors also came into play and worked in very different ways. The minority argued that the Catholic Church could not tailor the truth entrusted to it so that others would not take offence. The obvious social pressures behind the German and

American bishops were viewed by the *Coetus* as undue and inappropriate interference over matters of doctrine and correct biblical interpretation. Being ‘politically correct’ was not a remit of the Council, only proclaiming that truth handed on by the apostles. Indeed, this same point was taken up and used crudely by some Arab press and countries that were squarely against any Catholic Church pronouncement ‘siding’ with the Jews. For example, while the draft document was still being debated in 1964, a Syrian newspaper editor called the Council a second Judas who betrayed Christ for Jewish money, not this time for thirty pieces of silver but for American dollars (Oesterreicher 1968: 105, citing *Herder Correspondence*, March 1965, 80). The *Jerusalem Times* in Jordan ran the headline: ‘Who crucified Christ? The Vatican in the year 1964’. Radio Cairo, on 25 November 1964, through the Constituent Council of the Islamic World, warned of troubled and even bloody relations that could follow if the document was accepted.

But the Arabs were not the only protesters against the intention of the Council. The Eastern Churches joined the *Coetus*’s protests against the document on the Jewish people, but for very different reasons. They were concerned for the safety of Christians in the Middle East, were the Council to ‘side’ with the Jews. For example, the Orthodox Church in Jordan invited Catholics to join them and leave the Catholic Church, rather than face persecution for European and American political gain rather than for the truth of the faith. They also argued that the Vatican was putting serious obstacles against Christian unity and some Orthodox members of parliament pressed for Catholic Schools to be seized by the government. This terrible treble threat: hostility from the Arab world towards the Vatican, endangering the life of Christians in the Middle East, and destroying relations with the Eastern Orthodox churches were used by the *Coetus* in debates on the Council floor. It is difficult to judge whether this was cynical expediency on their part (as is claimed by some, eg. in ed. Alberigo 2003: 135–93 (Giovanni Miccoli); 546–59 (Ricardo Burigana & Giovanni Turbanti); 2006: 211–21 (Mauro Velati)), for the threats were very real and even caused Cardinal Bea, arch supporter of the document on the Jewish people, to give way to changes on a number of counts. The reception of tradition cannot be separated from the socio-political context, although it cannot be reduced to it either.

How were these three factors dealt with by the majority? First, they too held that the bible was normative, but was the minority readings feasible any longer? Take the charge of ‘deicide’, a word not actually used in any New Testament text. Oesterricher argued that the ‘experts’ on the drafting commission and the minority bishops were at odds. The latter ‘would not accept that the reading of the Vulgate [Acts 3:15] . . . was wrong, that according to the original text and the context it should be translated: “You have killed the leader

towards life”, that is him who rose first and has prepared the way for others and led them into life.’ (108) (The Catholic authorised Douai-Rheims translation which is closest to the Vulgate has it: ‘But the author of life you killed, whom God hath raised from the dead, of which we are witnesses.’ The Jerusalem translation reads: ‘You have killed the Prince of life’.) The repeated points made by the majority are that the Jews who were involved in Christ’s death: (a) were a limited number of people and (b) did not *know* this was an act of deicide. These contextualisations should determine the reading of scripture. (For the *Coetus* the first point was rebutted by the representative theory and the second was explained as the blindness caused by sinful rejection of the truth).

Likewise for the majority, the other relevant biblical texts could all be read in this alternative manner. For example 1 Thessalonians 2:15 does not refer to the Jewish people as a whole, nor does Matthew 23: 30–32. John is very clear that ‘Jews’ cannot be applied to all Jews for he also says in 7:31, ‘many of the people believed in him’ and in 11:45, ‘many of the Jews . . . believed in him’. Similarly Mark 14:2 says the opponents of Jesus dared not seize him as they feared the ‘tumult of the people’. Roman 11 suggests that God has a purpose in Israel’s rejection, which can therefore not be attributed solely to hardheartedness and perfidy, but to God’s plans. Admittedly, the *Coetus* did not question Paul’s theology about Israel’s rejection being part of God’s plan, but they did not deduce from this that Israel was therefore valid in any way apart from Israel *as* the Old Testament people. Oesterricher dismisses the representative theory adopted by the *Coetus* arguing that if this was the case, then because the saviour is born from Mary, then Israel must be called the ‘womb of Christ’ (Oesterricher 1968: 113). But Oesterricher’s argument is more ambiguous than he realised, for it is also precisely the basis for supersessionism: that Israel is properly continued in the Church, as Mary, the ‘womb of Christ’, and not Israel as in post-second temple Judaism.

This dispute over reading biblical texts has never really been resolved within the Catholic Church, either specifically in terms of the question of the meaning of Israel after the time of Christ, nor in terms of an agreed hermeneutical rule for scriptural interpretation. After the Council the different hermeneutical emphases continue within official organs in the curia: on the one hand the Pontifical Commission for Biblical Studies when dealing with Judaism criticise allegorical readings which are said to instrumentalise and de-historicise Judaism (Pontifical Biblical Commission 2001: 3); and on the other hand, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger criticised the dominance of historical-critical approaches and urged a retrieval of pre-modern hermeneutical strategies (Ratzinger 1989). The reception of the biblical tradition relies on settling this prior question of hermeneutics.

Regarding 'deicide', the term was eventually dropped from the document on the explicit request of Paul VI, while keeping the meaning in so much as there was a clear condemnation of attributing the death of Christ to all Jews, then (in the time of Christ) and now. Cardinal Ruffini, who belonged to neither group, argued that 'deicide' should be dropped because no one could kill God anyway. The final text reads: 'Even though the Jewish authorities and those who followed their lead pressed for the death of Christ (cf. John 19:6), neither all Jews indiscriminately at that time, nor Jews today, can be charged with the crimes committed during his passion. It is true that the Church is the new people of God, yet the Jews should not be spoken of as rejected or accursed as if this followed from Holy Scripture.' (4)

The arguments from tradition are of course partly dependent on the biblical evidence. If one decides that the bible is properly read *contra* 'the teaching of contempt' (Isaac) then any tradition that perpetuates the contempt must be called into question. Calling tradition into question is complicated, given the Catholic view of the authority of tradition, and here again we have a diversity of views regarding the reception of prior tradition. The *Coetus* held the tradition to be right. The most cautious group within the majority wanted to argue that the tradition of contempt cannot be criticised *per se* for they wished to avoid an anachronistic charge. They also argued that such tradition is clearly not binding upon the Catholic Church today. Another group within the majority held that one should acknowledge that some teachings within the tradition are in error and repent for this and this would include the teaching of contempt. Most within this group would say that such teachings are not part of the magisterium of the Catholic Church and thus, this is a discernment of good and bad elements within the reformable non-binding strata of tradition. Thus, individuals, not the Church, committed errors in theological judgement. This was in fact Pope John Paul II's position at the turn of the millennium in his prayers seeking forgiveness from God for the past sins of Catholics against the Jewish people. He followed the International Theological Commission's report regarding the Catholic shame regarding the Jewish people's persecutions (1999: 5.5.4). A variation on this position is that one cannot repent for sins that have been committed by one's ancestors. A fourth position within the majority would acknowledge that the church, rather than individuals in the tradition, erred in some of its teachings. This view forks in two directions: the first would say this cannot apply to matters of faith and morals taught authoritatively (Dulles 2007: 59–81); the second would allow that errors can exist even at this level, even if only rarely (Küng 1971: 183–96).

In point of fact, no generally accepted authoritative teachings in the tradition apart from biblical commentaries were utilised in the debate



by the minority. Anonymously circulated materials at the Council did utilize such arguments. The ghost writer 'Bernardus', argued that the decree of 1751, the 'Inquisition for the Jews', is binding. The decree included amongst its many rules that Jews may not buy or receive books without those books being censored. It also stipulated that during Jewish burials no religious rites can be publicly observed. For the full text see Laurentin & Neuner 1966: 24–48. Oesterricher drops his calm prose when commenting on 'Bernardus': 'One must really be insane to regard such precepts as the law of Christ'. (118) (Pope Benedict XIV, who promulgated them, was not formally insane). The issue of tradition was not quite as clearly operative as in the argument that raged over the 'Declaration on Religious Liberty' (December 1965). There some three hundred years of tradition and the teachings of five popes is pitted against some five years of tradition in the single encyclical of John XXIII. The latter won the debate! For both sides of this reception debate: see Pavan 1969 for the majority, and Davies 1992 for the minority, and D'Costa commentary 2009.

Finally, the socio-political circumstances deeply affected both the minority and the majority groups in different ways. The treble threat was significant. However, the American and German bishops strongly supported the text and would not countenance removing it from the Council – a move countenanced by Bea in the light of the treble threat. In the end, two key changes satisfied some opposition to the document, both of which had been requested by Paul VI (who actually made six suggestions for changes). The word 'deicide' was dropped; and the 'condemnation' of anti-Semitism was toned down to 'deplores'. Paul VI argued that 'condemnation' was a formal doctrinal censure and that John XXIII had wanted to avoid condemnations. The voting on the document (see further below) was remarkable given the turbulent socio-political climate raging around the Council.

### The religions enter the Declaration

I want to briefly look at how this document on the Jews ended up as one on the 'Non-Christian Religions'. Three factors are significant. First, Paul VI from the start of his pontificate expressed a positive appreciation of non-Christian religions at various occasions and in most detail in *Ecclesiam Suam* (1964: 107–108). There he formulated the concentric circles of relations which is adopted by 'The Declaration' and *Lumen gentium* 16: with the Jews specially close to the Church; then the Muslims (based on shared monotheism, not on any covenant relation); then the African and Asian religions. Paul VI explicitly steers away from indifferentism (the view that all religions are possible salvific means) and proclaims the truth of Catholicism ('that the Christian religion is the one and only true religion'). But

he then adds that despite this: 'we do not wish to turn a blind eye to the spiritual and moral values of the various non-Christian religions, for we desire to join with them in promoting and defending common ideals in the spheres of religious liberty, human brotherhood, education, culture, social welfare, and civic order.' The key point in this quote is that social cooperation is not dependent on acceptance of non-Christian truth claims, even though there may be elements of spiritual and moral truth to be found in these religions. John XIII and Paul VI created an atmosphere that allowed for a positive treatment of other religions at the Council.

Second, a request for some treatment of other religions did not come until the second session of the Council in 1963, when two Cardinals (from Spain and Japan) and especially Bishop Da Veiga Coutinho of India pleaded that the document on the Jews be extended to include other religions. Not until 1964, in the third session, did this request get repeated and then immediately implemented. Requests came from bishops around the world, including a number of African bishops who wanted animism to be included in any extension. (The fact that it was not included meant that some African bishops joint the minority in opposing the document to express their discontent, not in agreement with the minority's arguments.) Only now did the Secretariat for Christian Unity which was overseeing the document call in new experts, for this new request to address world religions was beyond their expertise. Most significantly Georges Anawati OP from Egypt, an expert on Islam, and Josef Neuner SJ from India, an expert on Hinduism were enlisted, as was Yves Congar OP. There were also others. Hinduism and Buddhism (section 2), and Islam (section 3) now entered the newly born schema, transforming it radically, but carrying the original Jewish document within it as paragraph 4 in the shortest document of the Council.

Third, this treatment of the Jews within a wider context was seen as a way of dealing with the socio-political pressures mounting outside the Council. It was thought that the section on Islam might alleviate some Arab concerns. Radical in its context, 'The Declaration' was actually given little attention from the Arab and Muslim world.

While the Jewish section was the most deeply contested and widely publicised as the document proceeded through the Council, the new sections 1–3 were also contested with equal vigour and on similar grounds: scripture and tradition. In an official letter from the three leaders of *Coetus* on 11 October 1965, three days before the final vote for the document, the Council fathers were advised how to vote - and why. The letter was apparently in response to a request for guidance on this matter. The minority urged a rejection of sections 1–3 on Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam because of the guiding hermeneutical principle in the document of focusing on what the Church shares 'in common' with the religions. This principle, they argued, was alien to

the apostles and to the early Church which simply condemned error and preached Jesus Christ. There was no half-way house: what was not from Christ was not from God. Hence, this 'common' ground had no doctrinal basis at all and obscured the early church's relentless call for repentance and conversion. Further, they trenchantly criticised the 'comparative ideology' underlying the assumption that which 'we have in common'. Between a religion of revelation (Catholic Christianity) and religions of nature there is nothing in common. The resultant pictures of the religions, they argued, belonged more to the detached academic style of the history of religions, than the depiction of these religions through the eyes of faith. This is because faith proclaims a revealed Person, Jesus Christ, not a set of beliefs and values to compare with other religions. Grounds for commonality remove Christ from centre stage.

On Judaism, we have already seen their arguments, but a new one is added: that the document suppresses the necessary call for the future conversion of the Jews and mission to the Jewish people. Oesterricher criticises this point of theirs in an interesting fashion: in a pastoral Council one had to avoid 'offence to others' and given the 'centuries of injustice' towards the Jewish people a certain delicacy was required (127). Oesterricher does not argue theologically against mission, although some Catholics have done so since the Council (see below).

### The reception of the document at the final session of the Council

The final document was accepted by 2064 votes, with 58 against. Interestingly the section on the alleged blood libel curse on Israel and Israel's rejection by God, which the document sought to refute, was rejected by 245 fathers of the 2080 voting, the highest proportion of *non placet* votes in any of the eight voting questions put to the Council regarding 'The Declaration'. The section on Islam had little immediate impact on the Arab world which had instead focussed on 'The Declaration's' attention to the Jews. Most Jews and Muslims saw Vatican positive statements about the Jews as political support for Israel, despite the relentless denial by the Vatican press and its nuncios on this point. Admittedly, some individual Muslims welcomed the statement publicly (Oesterricher 1968: 104). In the years subsequent to the Council, while 'The Declaration' has been mainly welcomed by non-Christians, it has also been criticised individuals and groups from all religions. For most of the world, 'The Declaration' heralded a new age in the Catholic Church: other religions were recognised as ways in which truth and goodness were found outside the Catholic Church; these religions sometimes reflected the activity of God; the Catholic Church had much to learn from these

religions; and the Catholic Church should cooperate with the religions towards the common good. Whether this involved a change in doctrinal teaching was much disputed by all sides.

In terms of 'reception' we see emerging a complex set of hermeneutical questions: how is scripture and tradition to be interpreted; which elements of tradition are binding and which not?; and who is to have the final word in determining these answers: the pope, the pope with the college of bishops, individual theologians, or the faithful as a whole? The question of the reception of 'The Declaration' is not finished in the promulgation of 'The Declaration', but simply starts a new cycle of reception (of the reception). Interpreting the document was and is almost as complex as interpreting the sources that led to the document. Interestingly, the same sub-texts and hermeneutical questions arise in tracking the 'The Declaration's' reception.

### The reception of the Declaration after the Council

Subsequent to 'The Declaration', the official hierarchy has produced a number of statements (through encyclicals, curial bodies – Congregations and Pontifical Councils - dealing with doctrine, mission, the Jewish people, and other religions) clarifying the teaching of the Council and developing further the positive teachings of the Council. These documents also adjudicate in certain debates as to the legitimacy of certain theological interpretations of the Council. The question of the correct interpretation of the Council is still very much contested. There are four different approaches, some of which are compatible with others and some not. First, there is the historical critical school, exemplified by Giuseppe Alberigo and his Bologna School, which assumes that if we can reconstruct the intentions of the historical players in the composition of the documents we can access the meaning of the documents. Second there are varieties of development from the Alberigo thesis, drawing on various theories of reception from cultural studies and philosophical hermeneutics, such as Ormond Rush's drawing upon Hans Robert Jauss reception theory, or Joseph Komonchak's utilisation of 'event' theory from literary studies ( see Rush 2004; Komonchak 2007). Third, there is the traditional internal hierarchy of Council documents reading-theory, which states that, for example, Dogmatic Constitutions must always guide our reading of lower level documents (a Declaration, in this instance), so that proper interpretation of 'The Declaration' only follows from a close exegesis of 'The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church', 8–16, as is advanced by Illaria Morali (see Morali 2010). Closely allied to this is a fourth position, that argues that the Council should be read interpreted by the tradition (previous Councils,

magisterial teachings etc) as argued by Pope Benedict XVI, Levering, Marchetto and others. (See Benedict XVI, 2005). My own view, which cannot be argued for here, is that the fourth position is capable of including the others, although in so doing, it modifies and corrects the first two. For example, while rightly understanding the full historical context of the Council documents, as Alberigo and his team seek to do, we cannot claim that the meaning of the texts is restricted to the intentions of the historical players individually or as groups, but rather than the texts finally require exegesis also in the more normative light of tradition both before and after the Council. This is admittedly to put the matter too simply, for far too much hangs on this important debate.

Some have even seen in the Vatican's attempt to 'control' the reception of the Council documents, papal agreement with the minority position. Let me briefly look at the *Coetus* after the Council to test this one claim a little further. The *Coetus* continued its criticisms after the Council and their collective response can be analysed as containing the following three trajectories, some of which overlap and some of which are exclusive. First, the Council was defended (emphasising certain texts and certain interpretations) with the allied argument that liberal modernist *interpretations* of the Council were misleading. Second, the Council was defended, with the argument that the *only* correct interpretations must be forthcoming from the pope and the official teaching organs of the Church. Third, a line developed that the *actual* Council documents had been infected by liberalism and modernism and the teachings represented a schism as they were not continuous with the Catholic tradition. The three key areas causing schism here were religious pluralism, equal civic rights for all religions in society, and most importantly the liturgy.

Lefebvre started out with trajectory one, moved to trajectory two, and finally held the third, although many of the *Coetus* group stopped short at the third trajectory. A reasonable case has been made by Menozzi (1987) that Pope Paul VI follows the first and second trajectories. The same could be argued for Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI (on Cardinal Ratzinger/Benedict XVI, see Rowland 2008: 84–104). This does not mean these three popes belonged to the 'minority' during the Council, but that after the Council they all had deep sympathy with some of the minority *concerns*, and Paul possibly during the Council as well. Benedict XVI has been particularly concerned to heal this schism, and while Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, he had close dealings with the Lefebvre schismatics, called the Society of St Pius XII.

If we turn to individual Catholic theologians we can see a remarkable diversity of interpretations of 'The Declaration' which relate to a number of factors, more of one which can operate in any particular theologian: close historical reading practices (accurate exegesis of

the texts and attention to the development of the schema); theological presuppositions already held by that theologian suggesting certain interpretations of the text both maximally and minimally influenced by the exegetes presuppositions; the attempt to read the texts in continuity with the teachings of the Church; the attempt to read the texts as breaking new ground in certain areas and thus not to be interpreted by previous non-binding or binding teachings; the reading of the texts without any constraints from previous teachings. I believe that one can actually interpret these texts ‘correctly’ as indicated above, but this does not itself mean a closure of meaning, but an opening up of new questions and problems.

To proceed, I shall focus on a single question related to all religions: did ‘The Declaration’ teach or imply that non-Christian religions might be a means to salvation? This has been hotly debated. On the more ‘radical’ wing, the American Catholic theologian Paul Knitter argues that ‘The Declaration’ is a ‘watershed’ in the Church’s attitude to non-Christian religions for it overturns a basically negative attitude towards other religions into positive appreciation, seeking the common ground and working together in cooperation (1985: 121). Knitter (falsely) argues that ‘the majority of contemporary Catholic theologians’ interpret ‘The Declaration’ as implicitly or explicitly validating other religions as means for ‘authentic “religious experience”’ (124); that is, that these religions have an authentic validity in themselves. Knitter argues that since Rahner is the ‘chief engineer’ of this ‘watershed’, his own approach opens up the real direction intended by the Council. Rahner’s theory of anonymous Christianity and of the anonymous Christian grants legitimacy to other religions as salvific structures *until* they are confronted with the truth of the gospel and this means, for Knitter, that other religions can be means of salvation (Knitter 1985: 125–30). For Knitter, Rahner did not go far enough. Knitter supports other Catholic theologians who have picked up on what is the obvious ‘next step’ implied within the Rahnerian/ ‘Declaration’ trajectory.

Knitter develops two arguments to support this next step. The first comes from the shift on the teachings about the Jews. Since ‘The Declaration’ prohibited contempt and acknowledged the Church’s ‘common spiritual heritage’ (the Old Testament) and prohibited speaking about the Jews as ‘rejected or accursed’, Knitter along with some American Catholic theologians like Gregory Baum, Rosemary Ruether and John Pawlikowski argue that the Council teaches ‘that the Jewish religion was not meant to be “superseded” by Christianity; Judaism preserves its own value and role in God’s plan, alongside Christianity.’ (Knitter, 131). The logical step, argues Knitter, is to apply what has been said of Israel, analogically to other religions – which was Rahner’s argument, but applied with more qualifications and caution by Rahner. This is precisely the move Knitter, Baum,

Ruether and Pawlikowski make. The second argument urges lifting Rahner's 'time limit' regarding the provisional salvific efficacy of a religion until the time of its meeting Christianity, what Rahner calls their provisional 'lawful validity'. Knitter notes the evident holiness and goodness of many non-Christians who have heard about Christianity and in good faith do not accept its message. Can one confidently say that this person's religion thus has no validity for them because of this, even if we continue to see their adherence to that religion produces all manner of spiritual fruits? Knitter points out that Küng has been brave enough to make the next step, moving away from a normative ecclesiocentricism, but has not been able to make the decisive step away from a normative Christology. Knitter is clear that this last move is not an orientation found within Vatican II, but urges theologians to move in that direction.

Knitter's reading of the documents would not have been accepted by Rahner, who actually wrote of 'The Declaration': 'the theological quality of non-Christian religions remains undefined.' (Rahner 1984: 290) Rahner did not think the actual documents supported a positive or a negative answer to the salvific efficacy of non-Christian religions. I have criticised Knitter's reading elsewhere (D'Costa 2000: 30–40). The important point regarding the question of reception is that within twenty five years the Council documents are being read as encouraging indifferentism within the tradition (and often called 'theological pluralism' in current literature), both towards Judaism and the world religions. Statements from other documents within the Council that clearly oppose such readings are not always properly considered (most clearly: *Lumen gentium* 14–16, where in 14 the necessity of the Church for salvation is reiterated – *Ecclesiam hanc peregrinantem necessariam esse ad salutem*; and *Ad gentes* 3–7).

The same criticism of Knitter cannot be made of Jacques Dupuis SJ who treads a delicate path between Rahner's inclusivism and Knitter's pluralism in what Dupuis calls 'inclusivist pluralism'. Dupuis meticulously inspects 'The Declaration' and *all* related Council texts on this question and concludes that Rahner's assessment is correct. Furthermore, Dupuis sees the main focus of 'The Declaration' as concerned with the 'horizontal relationship' of the religions with the Church, rather than the 'vertical relationship' of the traditions with Christ. He suggests that had 'The Declaration' applied itself to this vertical relationship it may have been able to connect the 'presence of the values and positive elements in these religious traditions' to an 'acknowledgement of these same traditions as legitimate paths of salvation for their members, although necessarily in relation to the mystery of Christ' (1977: 170). Dupuis eventually finds the magisterial materials for his daring hypothesis from post-Conciliar teachings, indirectly from John Paul's encyclicals *Redemptoris Hominis* (1979: 6, 11, 12), *Dominum et Vivificantem* (1986: 53) and *Redemptoris*

*Missio* (1990: 28 – ‘The Spirit’s presence and activity affect not only individuals but also society and history, peoples, cultures and religions’) and directly from the document *Dialogue and Proclamation: Reflections and Orientation on Interreligious Dialogue and the Proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ* (1991). This document was jointly published by the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue and the Congregation for the Evangelisation of Peoples and thus shares in the ‘Church’s magisterium’ (178) according to Dupuis. It should be noted that Dupuis was a key drafter in the former group’s input into the document, although that should not technically bear upon the question of the document’s authoritative status or otherwise. It explicitly says in para. 29: ‘The mystery of salvation reaches out to them [members of other religions], in a way known to God, through the invisible action of the Spirit of Christ. Concretely, it will be *in the sincere practice of what is good in their own religious tradition* and by following the dictates of their conscience that the members of other religions respond positively to God’s invitation and receive salvation in Jesus Christ, even while they do not recognize or acknowledge him as their Saviour.’ (Emphasis added by Dupuis 1977: 178) Dupuis argues this magisterial statement moves the tradition out of the fulfilment trajectory into acknowledging ‘participated mediations’ of religious traditions in God’s revelation for the salvation of their members. Dupuis can be said to move away from ecclesiocentricism, but upholds a strong Christocentricism.

Two further teaching documents of the magisterium apply to the question of judging whether Dupuis’ interpretation of post-Vatican II magisterial teaching have gone too far. This allows us to see the way that the magisterium itself becomes part of the interpretation of the magisterium in a way advocated by my fourth group of interpreters of the Council. Note well, that only the reception of the document helps clarify what constitutes authentic reception. The documents related to Dupuis’ reading are *Dominus Iesus*, 2000 (subsequently *Dominus*) and the *Notification on the book Towards a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism by Father Jacques Dupuis, SJ* (January 2001), both published by the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith. I cannot follow through a detailed examination of these documents here (see further D’Costa 2007, 2008). Proposition 8 of the *Notification* deals with ‘the value and salvific function of the religious traditions’ pertinent to my question:

‘In accordance with Catholic doctrine, it must be held that “whatever the Spirit brings about in human hearts and in the history of peoples, in cultures and religions, serves as a preparation for the Gospel” (cf. Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen gentium*, 16) [John Paul II, Encyclical letter *Redemptoris missio*, 29.] It is therefore legitimate to maintain that the Holy Spirit accomplishes salvation in non-Christians also through those elements of truth and goodness present in the various



religions; however, to hold that these religions, considered as such, are ways of salvation, has no foundation in Catholic theology, also because they contain omissions, insufficiencies and errors [Cf. Second Vatican Council, Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen gentium*, 16; Declaration *Nos- tra aetate*, 2; Decree *Ad gentes*, 9...DI, 8.] regarding fundamental truths about God, man and the world.'

I have cited the footnotes to show the way reception moves both forward and backward so one magisterial teaching, *Dominus*, can allow us to understand previous teachings ('The Declaration' and 'The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church'), which themselves determine the teachings of *Dominus*, indicating the constant process of clarification and definition, back and forth, that is required for teaching the truth (in particular contexts).

To return to my main theme of the reception of 'The Declaration', there are also other readings offered by Paul Hacker (1980), Henricus van Straelen (1994), and the Lutheran theologian Mikka Ruokanen (1992) who basically argue, with some significant differences, that three hermeneutical keys are required for properly interpreting the document. First, drawing on the 'Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation' (November 1965) it is argued that revelation is exclusive to the Old and New Testaments. No other religion contains revelation, except Israel in so much as it shares this revelation (the Old Testament). But they oppose the Ruether et al line applauded by Knitter, for they do not attribute to Israel after Christ the continued status of a revealed religion, even if they acknowledge that Israel's bible is the 'revelation' built upon in the new Israel, the Church. Second, they commonly argue that all creation shares in universal grace (that sustains and keeps the world in being), but not in saving grace, which is related to Christ preached and accepted. Third, this makes religions at their best, the highest achievements of the human search for God, but finally preparations (*preparatio evangelicae*) that require completion in Christ and his Church. Interestingly, *Dominus'* much contested distinction between 'faith' and 'beliefs' (4) corresponds to the first and third point here, but *Dominus* is opposed to the second in so much as it admits the saving activity of the 'Spirit' being present within elements of other religions, mixed with error and superstition, but which nevertheless indicates the presence of supernatural saving grace. This is the position advocated by Joseph Ratzinger and Hans von Balthasar although neither offers a close exegesis of 'The Declaration'.

## Conclusion

The reception of scripture and tradition that resulted in 'The Declaration', itself then becoming tradition, continues in the reception

of 'The Declaration' by Catholic theologians and the magisterium, along with the re-reception of scripture and tradition mediated by 'The Declaration'. A remarkable hermeneutical spiral takes place. What is even more remarkable, but beyond my brief here, is the Catholic claim that the Holy Spirit guides this spiral deeper and deeper into the truth given in Christ and safeguarded by the Church. The spiral therefore is both open-ended but also determined by various trajectories. And here the reception of tradition most clearly becomes the question of the development of doctrine, or the elaboration of doctrine already explicitly known and taught and handed on. Above, I have tried to trace the complex hermeneutical issues involved, while also indicating a possible resolution to some of the debates, while at every stage claiming that proper interpretation of the documents is not closure, but a new step in the spiral of 'reception' which the apostle Paul warned was an issue of the continuity of truth: 'if anyone preaches a version of the Good News different from the one you have already heard, he is to be condemned.' (Galatians 1:9).

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