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Vladimir Latinovic • Gerard Mannion
Jason Welle, O.F.M.
Editors

Catholicism Engaging Other Faiths

Vatican II and its Impact

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Editors

Vladimir Latinovic
Tübingen University
Tübingen, Germany

Gerard Mannion
Department of Theology
Georgetown University
Washington, DC, USA

Jason Welle, O.F.M.
Pontifical Institute for Arabic and
Islamic Studies
Rome, Italy

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*For Jack DeGioia—with gratitude—
A true facilitator of interfaith dialogue and understanding*

Interpreting the Bible in Relation to Other Religions: Hermeneutics and Identity

Leo D. Lefebure

Amid the debate over the degrees of continuity and discontinuity between the Second Vatican Council and the earlier Catholic tradition, one of the most important and transformative hermeneutical decisions made by the council deserves particular attention: how Catholics interpret the Bible in relation to other religious traditions.¹ The challenge goes back to ancient times, when Israelites and Jews interpreted their sacred texts and traditions in a lively exchange with their religious neighbors, which involved both appropriation and polemic. Followers of Jesus Christ continued this

¹John W. O'Malley, S.J., *What Happened at Vatican II* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008); Catherine E. Clifford, *Decoding Vatican II: Interpretation and Ongoing Reception*, 2013 Madaleva Lecture in Spirituality (New York: Paulist Press, 2014); Ladislav Orsy, S.J., *Receiving the Council: Theological and Canonical Insights and Debates* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2009); *Never Revoked: Nostra Aetate as Ongoing Challenge for Jewish-Christian Dialogue*, ed. Marianne Moyaert and Didier Pollefeyt, Louvain Theological and Pastoral Monographs 40 (Leuven: Peeters and Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010).

L. D. Lefebure (✉)
Georgetown University, Washington, DC, USA
e-mail: ll253@georgetown.edu

tradition by interpreting their sacred texts in relation to other religious traditions; in these relationships, Christians continued the biblical critique of idols, but they also appropriated important elements from other religious traditions.

The Bible offers a variety of precedents for interreligious relations, ranging from the cordial encounter of King Solomon with the Queen of Sheba (1 Kgs 10:1–13) to the criticism of King Solomon for marrying foreign wives and allowing worship of deities such as Astarte and Milcom (1 Kgs 11:5–13) to the brutal command of Elijah to kill the priests of Baal just a few chapters later in the same book (1 Kgs 18:39–40). Since the Christian Bible is complex and multi-voiced, every community and every generation of Christians must decide which biblical passages to place in the foreground and which in the background of its understanding.

In reading the scriptures in regard to other religious traditions, Christians can choose to employ a hermeneutics of hostility or a hermeneutics of generosity, or some combination of the two. Often this choice may seem self-evident and receive little or no reflection, but it is one of the most important factors shaping both biblical hermeneutics and interreligious relations. A hermeneutics of hostility judges other religious alternatives harshly and places primary emphasis on biblical texts that condemn other traditions and in some cases even demand violent attacks on others in the name of God. The polemic against idols in prophetic and apocalyptic texts can easily be read as supporting such a stance. A hermeneutics of hostility can combine with a variety of methodologies, ranging from allegorical interpretation to historical criticism. A hermeneutics of respect and generosity seeks to heal relationships and places primary emphasis on biblical texts that propose common values and that counsel reconciliation and cooperation. In ancient Israel, the wisdom tradition engaged constructively in dialogue with the sages of other traditions and borrowed from them.² Throughout history, Catholics have generally interpreted the Bible through a lens of hostility toward other religious paths. One of the most important contributions of the Second Vatican Council was to transform official Catholic practice from a hermeneutic of hostility to one of respect and generosity in interreligious relations. This transformation sets an agenda that challenges Catholics still.

²Leo G. Perdue, *The Sword and the Stylus: An Introduction to Wisdom in the Age of Empires* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008); Leo G. Perdue, *Wisdom Literature: A Theological History* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2007).

Together with the shift from a hermeneutic of hostility to one of respect and generosity come important and intriguing questions concerning identity and boundaries. A hermeneutic of hostility often supports an identity forged through oppositional bonding. Traditionally Catholics defined their identity against Jews and Muslims, who were viewed as allies of the Antichrist. A hermeneutic of respect and generosity brings greater attention to what unites Catholics and followers of other religious paths. In some contexts, boundaries can be very clear and firm, marked by formidable barriers; in other settings boundaries may be more fluid, serving as places of communication and exchange; here questions of identity are more open to discussion and negotiation. What Catholics share with others may be at least as important as what differentiates them.

Nostra Aetate bears the title *Declaratio de ecclesiae habitudine ad religiones non-christianas* (“Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christians”). The word “*habitus*” is usually translated as “relation,” but it can also mean “attitude.” The use of the term “*non-christianas*” suggests a definition of Catholic identity that stands in sharp contrast to others who are designated as “non-Christians.”³ Nonetheless, the opening section makes a bold assertion of oneness that may seem utopian or eschatological: “*Una enim communitas sunt omnes gentes*” (“For all peoples are one community,” NA 1). *Nostra Aetate* grounds the assertion of oneness in the common origin and common destination of all humans, but the assertion has multiple implications.

In the shift from a hermeneutic of hostility to a hermeneutic of generosity, one of the most interesting questions concerns the significance of the boundaries between Catholics and followers of other religious traditions. To what degree are Catholics fundamentally different from other traditions, and to what degree are they already now “*una communitas*”? In different ways, the question of boundaries is important for Catholic relations with Jews, Muslims, and Buddhists. Contemporary chaos theory advises us that boundaries can function in many ways, variously uniting and separating. Not to have boundaries is not to have a clear identity, but boundaries that are too rigid can imprison and restrict life. Boundaries can be impermeable barriers, fortified by implacable walls; they can also be meeting points for commerce and transit, vital places for the exchange of

³In 1964 Pope Paul VI had established the Secretariat for Non-Christians. In 1988 Pope John Paul II changed the name of the dicastery to the “Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue.” Many have felt that it is not helpful to refer to others by what they are not.

goods and religious ideas. This chapter will explore the transformation of Catholic interpretation of the Bible that Vatican II endorsed in relations with Jews, Muslims, and Buddhists; it will also note the questions of identity and boundary that emerge in the transformed situation.

JEWISH-CATHOLIC RELATIONS

Tragically, most of the history of biblical interpretation took place within a horizon of hostility. In the first century, some Jews accepted Jesus of Nazareth as Lord and Messiah, while others vigorously rejected this claim. To support the conflicting perspectives, each side could quote Jewish scriptures, especially in Greek-speaking contexts as translated in the Septuagint. These polemics shaped the writings in the New Testament. Later generations of Christians who were not Jewish often read New Testament polemics against some Jews as universal condemnations of all Jews who did not accept Jesus as the Christ. For example, later Christians often understood the prophetic criticisms of ancient Israelites to condemn all Jews of all ages as a rebellious, stiff-necked people. Jesus's disputes with scribes and Pharisees (e.g.: Mt. 15:3–9; 23:1–36; Mk 7:1–8) were understood to condemn all Jews as hypocrites.

Historically, one of the greatest dangers has been that Christians, based upon a hostile interpretation of the Bible, too often assumed they knew who Jews were. This interpretation set an often rigid and negative framework for Christian attitudes and policies toward the Jews of different times and places. Frequently, Christians engaged in oppositional bonding, defining their own identity in opposition to Jews, who were seen as enemies of God and Christianity. Henri de Lubac, S.J., one of the leading scholars of the history of Catholic biblical interpretation, a courageous leader who personally opposed the Nazi occupation of France during World War II and condemned anti-Semitism, nonetheless endorsed the patristic claim that Christians have displaced Jews as interpreters of the Bible. De Lubac perpetuated the patristic and medieval Catholic view of Jews as librarians who present a book, that is, the Jewish Bible, which they themselves cannot understand.⁴

The most serious charge of all came from the climactic scene in the gospels, when the Jewish leaders and crowd in Jerusalem are presented as persuading a reluctant Pontius Pilate to have Jesus crucified, exclaiming: "His blood be on us and on our children!" (Mt 27:25). After this, Jews were believed to have been rejected by God, and their covenant broken off. From

⁴Henri de Lubac, S.J., *Medieval Exegesis*, vol. 1, *The Four Senses of Scripture*, trans. Mark Sebanc (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1998), 242.

the time of Melito of Sardis in the late second century onward, Christians repeatedly accused Jews of the worst crime of all: deicide—the attempted murder of God. In one of the most influential biblical interpretations in all of Christian history, Melito offered a biting, sarcastic commentary on the New Testament narrative of Jesus Christ:

It is he [Jesus] that has been murdered.

And where has he been murdered? In the middle of Jerusalem.

By whom? By Israel.

Why? Because he healed their land

And cleansed their lepers

and brought light to their blind

and raised their dead,

that is why he died...

What strange crime, Israel, have you committed?

You dishonoured him that honoured you;

You disgraced him that glorified you...

You killed him that made you live.⁵

In a similar vein, Augustine interpreted the Jews' loss of an independent kingdom and dispersal among the nations as a punishment for their killing Christ: "And if they had not sinned against Him, seduced by impious curiosity as if by magic arts, falling away into the worship of strange gods and idols, and at last putting to death the Christ, they would have remained in the same kingdom which, even if it did not grow in extent, would have grown in happiness."⁶ Augustine interpreted the mark of Cain as applying to the entire Jewish people for their role in the crucifixion of Jesus, which meant that they were to be preserved but in a subordinate position.⁷

⁵Melito of Sardis, *On Pascha and Fragments*, ed. and trans. Stuart George Hall (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), 39–41.

⁶Augustine, *The City of God against the Pagans*, ed. and trans. R.W. Dyson (Cambridge: University Press, 1998), 4.34; p. 186.

⁷Augustine, *Against Faustus* 12.9; Lisa A. Unterseher, *The Mark of Cain and the Jews: Augustine's Theology of Jews and Judaism*, Gorgias Dissertations 39 (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias, 2009), 8; Paula Fredrikson, *Augustine and the Jews: A Christian Defense of Jews and Judaism* (New York: Doubleday, 2008), 264.

Melito's charge of attempted deicide and Augustine's image of Jews bearing the mark of Cain shaped the Catholic tradition into the twentieth century. In 1937, in *Mit brennender Sorge*, Pope Pius XI vigorously condemned Nazi perspectives and practices, and he strongly asserted the value of the Old Testament for Christians, but he also reiterated the traditional Catholic belief that the Jewish people crucified Jesus, writing of "Christ who took His human nature from a people that was to crucify Him."⁸

At various points throughout history, there were some Catholics who viewed other religious traditions in a more generous light and interpreted the Bible with greater respect toward other paths, but all too often, their perspectives were not influential or widely shared. By the time of the Second Vatican Council, the context for Catholic interpretation of the Bible had been profoundly changed by the horrors of the Shoah. In the aftermath of these atrocities, many Catholics and other Christians recognized that the long Christian tradition of vilifying Jews needed to be changed. Jules Isaac, a French Jewish historian who had lost many of his family in the Shoah, pressed for a changed Catholic interpretation of the Bible that recognized the Jewish identity of Jesus and his first followers. In a private audience on June 13, 1960, Isaac urged Pope John XXIII to have the upcoming Second Vatican Council reject the traditional Catholic teaching of contempt for the Jewish people.⁹ In dialogue with Isaac and other Jewish scholars, Catholic biblical scholars became more conscious and critical of the anti-Jewish biases that Catholics had traditionally brought to their studies. Catholics coming from a Jewish background played a vital role in this transformation.¹⁰ Even though Pope John XXIII died before any conciliar document was promulgated, he set the stage for the council's contribution by dramatically reversing the interpretation of Augustine regarding the mark of Cain in relation to the Jews. In a dramatic reversal of imagery, Pope John XXIII applied the mark of Cain to Catholics for their historic mistreatment of Jews and asked God's forgiveness.¹¹

⁸Pius XI, Encyclical Letter *Mit brennender Sorge* ("On the Church and the German Reich"), AAS 29 (1937): 145–167, no. 16.

⁹Jules Isaac, *The Teaching of Contempt: Christian Roots of Anti-Semitism*, ed. Claire Huchet-Bishop (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1964); Jules Isaac, *Jesus and Israel*, ed. Claire Huchet-Bishop, trans. Sally Gran (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1971).

¹⁰John Connelly, *From Enemy to Brother: The Revolution in Catholic Teaching on the Jews, 1933–65* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012).

¹¹Quoted by *Catholic Herald*, May 14, 1965; Pinchas Lapide, *Three Popes and the Jews* (New York: Hawthorn, 1967), 318.

There was considerable debate both before and during the Second Vatican Council over whether a statement "On the Jewish Question" was advisable and what should be said. As the discussions proceeded, the hermeneutical realization of the need for a new relation to the Jewish people expanded to include other religious traditions as well. A number of the documents of Vatican II contributed to the transformed relationship with Jews. One of the most dramatic changes for the majority of Catholics involved the new Roman rite for celebrating the liturgy. The Tridentine rite, which had been in use since the late sixteenth century, provided for very few texts from the First Testament of the Bible to be read during the Catholic Eucharist; readings were generally from the epistles and the gospels. *Sacrosanctum Concilium* ("The Dogmatic Constitution on the Liturgy") called for a much wider selection of texts from the First Testament of the Catholic Bible to be read in liturgy (SC 51). Moreover, the council encouraged the use of the vernacular languages. In practice, this meant that many Catholics became much more familiar with a wider range of the texts of the First Testament. In this way, the Jewish heritage of Jesus and his early followers became much more apparent to a larger number of Catholics.

Dei Verbum ("The Dogmatic Constitution on Sacred Scripture") called Catholics to attend to the literary genres and historical context of the scriptures and to the social conventions of the biblical eras (DV 11–12). This had tremendous implications for interpreting New Testament writings as Jewish texts reflecting the diversity of Jewish life at that time, and as written prior to any final division between Judaism and Christianity. Increasingly, scholars in recent decades have come to interpret the texts of the New Testament as coming from a period before any final separation between Jews and Christians. Many early followers of Jesus were Jews who did not see acceptance of Jesus as a rejection of Judaism. Catholic biblical interpreters came to see the harsh judgments against Jewish leaders in the New Testament as reflecting inner-Jewish debates of the first century. This poses one of the major challenges for Catholics today: what does it mean to read New Testament texts as Jewish writings?

Lumen Gentium referred positively to the Jewish people as "a people according to their election most dear because of their ancestors: for God never goes back on his gifts and his calling (LG 16; see Rom 11:28–29)." This quietly reversed centuries of Catholic vilification of the Jewish people, setting an important precedent for hermeneutics of respect and generosity in place of the age-old hostility.

A year later *Nostra Aetate* again cited Paul's Epistle to the Romans as teaching that God's gifts to the Jewish people are irrevocable, *sine poenitentia*, without regret (NA 4; Rom 9–11). This implies that the covenant God made with ancient Israel has not been broken off, and that Jews should not be viewed as accursed, for they are still God's beloved people. The Second Vatican Council clearly and forcefully rejected the traditional practice of interpreting the Gospel of Matthew as collectively blaming Jews of all times and places for the death of Jesus. The Declaration notes that only a small number of Jews of that time would have been involved in any way in Jesus's crucifixion; and in a radical reversal of earlier Catholic teaching, the council asserts that later generations of Jews cannot in any way be blamed for the death of Jesus (NA 4). The Council forcefully condemns anti-Semitism from any source at any time. Anyone who knows Catholic Church history knows that this condemnation encompasses a wide array of earlier Catholic teachings and practices, including much of the history of biblical interpretation.

After the Council, Catholic authorities issued numerous documents instructing preachers not to continue the traditional anti-Jewish forms of preaching. In March 1967, the US Bishops' Committee for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs issued "Guidelines for Catholic-Jewish Relations." This statement described the Council's call for better relations with Jews as "an acknowledgement of the conflicts and tensions that have separated Christians and Jews through the centuries and of the Church's determination, as far as possible, to eliminate them."¹² The bishops commented on the implications of *Nostra Aetate*, stressing its call for "[s]cholarly studies and education[al] efforts... to show the common historical, biblical, doctrinal and liturgical heritage shared by Catholic and Jews, as well as their differences."¹³ The bishops' committee called for "[a]n explicit rejection... of the historical inaccurate notion that Judaism of that time, especially... Pharisaism, was a decadent formalism and hypocrisy"; they also urge acknowledgement by "Catholic scholars [of] the living and complex reality of Judaism after Christ... and the permanent election of [Israel], alluded to by St. Paul (Rom 9:29), and [incorporation

¹²Bishops' Committee for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs, National Conference of Catholic Bishops, "Guidelines for Catholic-Jewish Relations," in Bishops' Committee for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *The Bible, the Jews, and the Death of Jesus* (Washington, DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2004), 59.

¹³Ibid., 60.

of] the results into Catholic teaching."¹⁴ The bishops also noted the difficult issue of the use of the term *hoi iudaeoi* ("the Jews") in the Fourth Gospel, calling for a full and precise explanation of the use of this term in a way that does "appear to place all Jews in a negative light."¹⁵

In 1974, the Holy See issued "Guidelines and Suggestions for Implementing the Conciliar Declaration 'Nostra Aetate'"; about a decade later, in 1985 the Holy See issued "Notes on the Correct Way to Present the Jews and Judaism in Preaching and Catechesis of the Roman Catholic Church." This document begins with the mandate from Pope John Paul II to Catholic bishops and catechists to stress what Jews and Christians hold in common: "We should aim, in this field, that Catholic teaching at its different levels, in catechesis to children and young people, presents Jews and Judaism, not only in an honest and objective manner, free from prejudices and without any offences, but also with full awareness of the heritage common" to Jews and Christians.¹⁶ In the wake of the Vatican statements, in September 1988, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops issued its own programmatic statement, "God's Mercy Endures Forever: Guidelines on the Presentation of Jews and Judaism in Catholic Preaching."¹⁷ In opposition to the traditional stereotype of the Pharisee, this statement suggests that "Jesus was perhaps closer to the Pharisees in his religious vision than to any other group of his time"; in opposition to the notion that Jesus rejected Torah, the bishops note that "Jesus was observant of the Torah..., he extolled respect for it (see Mt 5:17–20), and he invited obedience to it (see Mt 8:4)."¹⁸

Regarding the Passion Narratives and the celebration of Holy Week, the bishops recall that the Second Vatican Council rejected any notion of collective guilt, and they state:

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵Ibid., 61.

¹⁶Pontifical Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, "Notes on the Correct Way to Present the Jews and Judaism in Preaching and Catechesis in the Roman Catholic Church," www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/relations-jews-docs/rc_pc_chrstuni_doc_19820306_jews-judaism_en.html.

¹⁷United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, "God's Mercy Endures Forever: Guidelines on the Presentation of Jews and Judaism in Catholic Preaching," www.usccb.org/beliefs-and-teachings/ecumenical-and-interreligious/jewish/upload/God-s-Mercy-Endures-Forever-Guidelines-on-the-Presentation-of-Jews-and-Judaism-in-Catholic-Preaching-1988.pdf, no. 18.

¹⁸Ibid., 3.

Because of the tragic history of the 'Christ-killer' charge as providing a rallying cry for anti-Semites over the centuries, a strong and careful homiletic stance is necessary to combat its lingering effects today.... The message of the liturgy in proclaiming the passion narratives in full is to enable the assembly to see vividly the love of Christ for each person, despite their sins, a love that even death could not vanquish.... To the extent that Christians over the centuries made Jews the scapegoat for Christ's death, they drew themselves away from the paschal mystery.¹⁹

Increasingly, Catholic biblical scholars came to see Jesus's polemical language not as a rejection of Judaism but rather as a good example of inner-Jewish debate. One example of the changed tone in Catholic biblical scholarship comes from John P. Meier regarding Jesus's combative language with the Pharisees in the gospels:

However, especially in view of the tragic history of later Christian polemics against Judaism, it must be stressed that the biting rhetoric used by Jews, including Jesus, in religious debates with their coreligionists should not be translated by Gentile audiences into a rejection of Judaism in general or of the Jewishness of one's adversaries in particular (the fiercely sectarian group at Qumran is the exception that proves the rule). Fiery denunciation was a revered rhetorical tradition from the prophets Amos and Hosea onward, and Jesus the prophet saw himself as standing in their line.²⁰

Closely related to this change is another of the most important recent developments in the scholarship on Christian origins, the emergence of the Christian movement from Judaism and the question of the relations between Jewish and Christian identities. Traditionally, scholars believed Christianity emerged as a distinct religion from Judaism in the first century. Increasingly, scholars have challenged this assumption, questioning whether separate identities were so clearly established in the first century. Today there are multiple perspectives on this issue, but many scholars now argue that there were more Jews who followed Jesus while remaining Jewish for a longer time than was traditionally thought. While many have used the term "Jewish Christianity" or "Christian Judaism," Matt Jackson-McCabe cautions that "there is not now, nor has there ever been, a generally agreed upon canon of works that constitute definitive examples

¹⁹ Ibid., 4.

²⁰ John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*, vol. 3, *Companions and Competitors* (New York: Doubleday, 2001), 338–39.

of Jewish Christianity, Christian Judaism, or any other such category."²¹ Scholars such as Petri Luomanen continue to defend and use the term, "Jewish Christianity,"²² but another approach is to define "Jewish believers in Jesus" as "Jews by birth or conversion who in one way or another believed Jesus was their savior."²³ While the discussion is multi-sided, what is clear is that there were numerous persons in antiquity who accepted Jesus in some sense as Lord and Messiah while continuing to practice Judaism.²⁴

Daniel Boyarin has studied the process of the formation of Christian and rabbinic Jewish identity, arguing that there were significant parallels between the leaders of these communities. He proposes that it is mistaken to look to later rabbinic sources for "sources" of the New Testament; rather, he claims, "Judaism is not the 'mother' of Christianity; they are twins joined at the hip."²⁵ Boyarin believes that "the border space between the juridical and abstract entities Judaism and Christianity, throughout late antiquity and even beyond, was a crossing point for people and religious practices."²⁶ He observes that Jewish believers in Jesus were strongly criticized both by Christian bishops and by Jewish rabbis, and he compares their situation to Chicanos and Tejanos near the US–Mexican border: "The Chicanos and Tejanos say: We didn't cross the border; the border crossed us."²⁷

When Pope John Paul II visited the Great Synagogue in Rome in 1986, he commented: "The Jewish religion is not 'extrinsic' to us, but in a certain way is 'intrinsic' to our own religion." This unique relationship challenges Catholics to reflect further on the ways in which they are already "*una communitas*" with the Jewish people.

²¹ Matt Jackson-McCabe, "Introduction," in *Jewish Christianity Reconsidered: Rethinking Ancient Groups and Texts* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), 4.

²² Petri Luomanen, "Ebionites and Nazarenes," in *Jewish Believers in Jesus: The Early Centuries*, ed. Oskar Skarsaune and Reidar Hvalvik (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2007), 81–117.

²³ Oskar Skarsaune, "Jewish Believers in Jesus in Antiquity—Problems of Definition, Method, and Sources," in *Jewish Believers in Jesus: The Early Centuries*, ed. Oskar Skarsaune and Reidar Hvalvik (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2007), 3.

²⁴ See the variety of perspectives in *The Ways That Never Parted: Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages*, ed. Adam H. Becker and Annette Yoshiko Reed (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007).

²⁵ Daniel Boyarin, *Border Lines: The Partition of Judaeo-Christianity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 5.

²⁶ Ibid., 1.

²⁷ Ibid., 1–2.

MUSLIM-CATHOLIC RELATIONS

The changed relation of Catholics to Jews had implications for every other interreligious relationship. Traditionally, Catholic relations with Muslims were frequently troubled. The rise of Islam in the seventh century posed a massive challenge to Catholic life on every level. There were various responses, often hostile. While in many settings Catholics worked out ways to live and trade with Muslims, for centuries Catholics interpreted Muslims and their actions in harsh apocalyptic terms, often in relation to the Antichrist and the Son of Perdition of 2 Thess. 2:3. In the seventh century, the pseudonymous writer known as Pseudo-Methodius interpreted the victories of the Arab Muslim armies in apocalyptic terms, as part of the ongoing drama of the four kingdoms described by the book of Daniel; this perspective would shape Christian attitudes for a millennium.²⁸ Pseudo-Methodius labeled Muslims as "Ishmaelites," employing the biblical name in a negative sense, and he saw these people as enemies who were preparing the way for the Son of Perdition. This text was still being reprinted 1000 years later at the siege of Vienna in 1683. Medieval Catholics repeatedly interpreted Muhammad either as the Antichrist or as a forerunner of the Antichrist,²⁹ and they frequently applied the term from the book of Revelation, "synagogues of Satan," to Muslims.³⁰

Despite the widespread hostility, there were some Catholics who came to know and respect Muslims and the Islamic tradition and who paved the way for the transformed attitudes of the Second Vatican Council. One of the most influential was Louis Massignon, who as a young man in a time of crisis benefitted from the hospitality of an Arab Muslim family in Baghdad.³¹ On the other side of the crisis, Massignon embraced Catholicism with a

²⁸Pseudo-Methodius wrote in Syriac under the pseudonym of the revered fourth-century martyr Methodius, who was bishop of Olympus in Lycia and who was killed in the Roman persecutions in 312 C.E. *The Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius*, in *The Seventh Century in the West-Syrian Chronicles*, trans. Andrew Palmer and Sebastian Brock (Liverpool: University Press, 1993), 222–42; Paul Julius Alexander, *The Byzantine Apocalyptic Tradition*, ed. Dorothy de F. Abrahamse (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985); F.J. Martinez, "Eastern Christian Apocalyptic in the Early Muslim Period: Pseudo-Methodius and Pseudo-Athanasius" (Ph.D., Catholic University of America, 1985), 58–246.

²⁹Bernard McGinn, *Antichrist: Two Thousand Years of the Human Fascination with Evil* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1994), 85–86; Norman Daniel, *Islam and the West: The Making of an Image* (1960; reprint, Oxford: Oneworld, 2000), 210–12.

³⁰Daniel, *Islam and the West*, 133–34.

³¹Mary Louise Gude, *Louis Massignon: The Crucible of Compassion* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1996).

sense of a vocation to improve relations with Muslims. Massignon placed the faith of Abraham and the virtue of hospitality in the foreground of his biblical interpretation, and he established houses of prayer to pray for Muslims—without seeking to convert them to Catholic faith. As a mark of his transformed identity, Pope Pius XI teasingly called him "a Catholic Muslim"; Massignon recalled: "He teased me, saying that by dint of loving them [Muslims], I had become a 'Catholic Muslim' in order that Muslims might be loved, on account of me, in the Church."³² Even though the context was light-hearted, Pope Pius XI touched on a fundamental question of identity: in becoming open to others, we take them and their perspectives into our lives and in some sense become one with them. What results is a transformed sense of who we are.

The "Catholic Muslim" would have a profound impact upon the young Monsignor Giovanni Battista Montini, who used to attend the association of prayer for Muslims founded by Louis Massignon and who learned much from him about Islam. Thus, when Montini became Pope Paul VI in 1963, the influence of Massignon hovered in the background as the pope promulgated the documents of Vatican II.

Regarding Muslims, the Second Vatican Council transformed Catholic attitudes by placing aspects of the biblical heritage common to Muslims and Catholics in the foreground of attention. *Lumen Gentium* includes Muslims in God's plan of salvation: "[T]he plan of salvation also embraces those who acknowledge the Creator, and among these the Moslems are first; they profess to hold the faith of Abraham and along with us they worship the one merciful God who will judge humanity on the last day" (LG 16). *Lumen Gentium* and *Nostra Aetate* quietly drop the age-old association of Muslims with the Antichrist and the Son of Perdition. In these documents, the council proposed a new framework for reading the Bible in relation to Muslims, emphasizing aspects of the biblical heritage that Catholics share with Muslims, such as worship of the one God, veneration for Abraham, Jesus, and Mary, the expectation of a final resurrection and judgment, as well as the virtues of prayer, fasting, and almsgiving. In what may seem a surprising move, the council also proposed that Catholics and Muslims pursue reconciliation through the act of forgetting so that they can together collaborate in realizing values that are important to both traditions (NA 3).

³²Louis Massignon, Letter of July 24, 1934; quoted in Christian Salenson, *Christian de Chergé: A Theology of Hope*, trans. Nada Conic (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press; Trappist, KY: Cistercian Publications, 2012), 36, n. 12.

The conciliar Declaration sets an agenda for reading the Islamic and the Christian scriptures and traditions in relation to each other in a new way, with the Jewish heritage appearing as a potential resource in this project. Many scholars recently have noted the close relation between the rise of Islam and the various forms of Jewish Christianity in antiquity. Hans Küng has related the developments in scholarship on Jewish Christianity to the rise of Islam, posing the question of, to what degree Catholics can acknowledge early Islam as a renewal of a Jewish form of Christianity that continues expressions of faith that were common in the early church period. Küng poses the question of what groups Muhammad could have been familiar with who would fit the positive profile of Christians that appears in the Qur'an; he concludes: "If we look for such believers, there is only one 'group' which fits: the Jewish Christians, that early form of Christianity whose members, mostly of Jewish origin, had combined their belief in Jesus as the Messiah with the observance of the ritual law of Moses."³³ While Küng acknowledges that all theories about what groups Muhammad may have known are conjectural (and, indeed, it is a view few scholars of early Islam accept today), he nonetheless maintains, "Whatever may be said about Muhammad's historical knowledge, there are unmistakable parallels between the Qur'an and the understanding of Christ in Jewish-Christian communities."³⁴ While others hold that the Christology the Qur'an is responding to was an orthodox Christian one (as opposed to a Jewish-Christian understanding), Küng nonetheless insists that "the analogies in content between the Qur'anic picture of Jesus and a Christology with a Jewish-Christian stamp are indisputable."³⁵ Küng proposes that the recent improvement in Jewish-Christian understanding regarding Christian origins is highly relevant to Muslim and Christian reflections on the origins of Islam:

After centuries of mutual contempt, the Jewish-Christian dialogue about Jesus made substantial progress once Jews and Christians together began to take seriously the abiding Jewish features of the message and figure of Jesus for their faith. Insight into the affinity between primitive Christianity and primitive Islam also needs to be utilized for Muslim-Christian dialogue—the earlier the better: Christians should not long see the Qur'anic understanding of Jesus as Muslim heresy but as a Christology with a primitive Christian colouring on Arabian soil.³⁶

³³ Hans Küng, *Islam: Past, Present and Future*, trans. John Bowden (Oxford: Oneworld, 2007), 494.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 496.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 501.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

In the current dialogues between Muslims and Catholics, the question of how the "*una communitas*" asserted by *Nostra Aetate* is to be understood returns in a new form. The more Catholics acknowledge the Jewishness of Jesus, the closer they approach Islamic views of Jesus, remaining clear differences notwithstanding. Increasingly, Catholic and Muslim scholars are reading the Qur'anic texts more closely and carefully in relation to the biblical heritage to understand the relation more clearly.

BUDDHIST-CATHOLIC RELATIONS

Questions of relationship and identity recur in different ways in the relationship between Catholics and Buddhists. While from one point of view, these religions may seem to be radically different in their most fundamental assumptions about human existence and the universe, nonetheless many Catholics have found deep points of convergence to the point of embracing practice of both Buddhist and Catholic paths simultaneously. The question of the meaning of "*una communitas*" appears in yet another light in this relationship.

While Clement of Alexandria was aware of Buddhists around the year 200 C.E., it is not clear how much accurate information he possessed,³⁷ and Buddhists were not as prominent in Catholic awareness for most of the church's history. This situation changed in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, when European Catholic missionaries increasingly came into contact with Buddhists across Asia and sent reports to Europe. Many Catholic missionaries during this period viewed Buddhist images as the idols condemned in the Bible and sharply rejected Buddhist practices. In many places the hermeneutics of hostility was so strong that no serious dialogue between Buddhist and Catholic was possible. In the seventeenth century, Jesuit Athanasius Kircher described the Dalai Lama of the Tibetans as "their false Deity," and he called the Tibetan Buddhists' veneration of him "rather mad and brain-sick idolatry."³⁸

In the twentieth century there were numerous efforts from Catholics to improve relations with Buddhists and to appreciate the values of Buddhist perspectives and practices. Despite the profound differences between Buddhist and Catholic perspectives, some Catholics, such as the

³⁷ Clement of Alexandria, *Stromateis: Books One to Three*, trans. John Ferguson (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1991), 1.71.6; p. 76.

³⁸ Trent Pomplun, *Jesuit on the Roof of the World: Ippolito Desideri's Mission to Eighteenth-Century Tibet* (Oxford: University Press, 2010), 79.

German Jesuit Hugo Enomiya-Lassalle, found that the practice of Zen Buddhism enhanced their understanding of the Bible. Enomiya-Lassalle explained: "Zen, because it is not bound to any particular worldview, can also help Christians come to an experience of God without compromising their Christian faith."³⁹

In the deliberations before and during the Second Vatican Council, Catholic leaders generally had focused first and foremost on relations with Jews in the wake of the Shoah; Middle Eastern Catholics quickly drew attention to relations with Muslims. In time, Catholic leaders came to reflect on relations with Hindus and Buddhists as well. For the first time in the history of ecumenical councils, *Nostra Aetate* publicly expresses the respect of the Catholic Church for Buddhists and Buddhism: "In Buddhism, according to its various forms, the radical inadequacy of this changeable world is acknowledged and a way is taught whereby those with a devout and trustful spirit may be able to reach either a state of perfect freedom or, relying on their own efforts or on help from a higher source, the highest illumination" (NA 2; Tanner 2:969). While this statement is very brief and makes no pretense of being a complete description, it is extremely significant for its expression of respect. *Nostra Aetate* states that the Catholic Church is open to discovering and appreciating truth and holiness in the path of the Buddha and his followers. In the wake of the council, Catholics such as J.K. Kadowaki, a Japanese Buddhist who became Catholic as a young man and then entered the Society of Jesus, entered deeply into Zen practice and found new perspectives for engaging the paradoxical teachings in the Bible. At first Kadowaki was impressed by the radical differences between Catholic and Zen perspectives, but eventually he came to a surprising discovery:

As I came to deliberate on various Zen koans, I was surprised and delighted to discover that one of the central themes of the Zen experience was a dynamic grasp of the contradictory dialectic of the part and the whole, and the whole and the part. I realized that the Zen way of apprehending it could shed great light on the understanding of the puzzling Biblical passages quoted above. [Jn 12:24, 32]⁴⁰

³⁹Hugo Enomiya-Lassalle, *Living in the New Consciousness*, ed. Roland Ropers, trans. Paul Shepherd (Boston: Shambhala, 1988), 70.

⁴⁰J. K. Kadowaki, *Zen and the Bible*, trans. Joan Rieck (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2002), 65.

Kadowaki explained that Zen experience can shed light on the Bible for Catholics because it "teaches us that the dynamic dialectical relationship between the part and whole cannot be grasped by rational speculation. Instead we must abandon our egos and unite with God who is the Source of all creation. If we are able to become one with God through complete abandonment of self, it will be easy to see that all being is one in God."⁴¹ Buddhists' perspectives on human identity pose intriguing questions and challenges that can open up new vistas. Again, there emerges a sense of oneness beyond all difference, though it is not the type of oneness that can be captured in concepts and definitions.

CONCLUSION

The Second Vatican Council called for a conversion of heart, conscience, and mind, in the area of interpreting the Bible in relation to other religious traditions. It also posed a type of Christian koan by asserting that all peoples are already "*una communitas*." In October 1968, just three years after the Council ended, Thomas Merton spoke in Calcutta, India and avowed that there already exists "*una communitas*" among religious practitioners, but we must be alert to recognize it:

And the deepest level of communication is not communication, but communion. It is wordless. It is beyond words, and it is beyond speech, and it is beyond concept. Not that we discover a new unity. We discover an older unity. My dear brothers, we are already one. But we imagine that we are not. And what we have to recover is our original unity. What we have to be is what we are.⁴²

⁴¹Ibid., 69.

⁴²Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal*, ed. Naomi Burton, Patrick Hart and James Laughlin (New York: New Directions, 1973), 308.

stood together in front of the panel of speakers. I am sure this proximity hadn't occurred before—Mary Who Unties Our Knots is relatively new, after all—but we are all better off for noticing a most fitting, passing harmony across religious borders, the Elephant and the Lady, the true and the holy finding one another on a Saturday in May 2015. This was no great revelation, to be sure, only a small and temporary juxtaposition of the kind that could easily be missed if we keep looking for the big picture, not the small detail.

CHAPTER 19

Epilogue

Leo D. Lefebure

Angelo Giuseppe Roncalli arrived in Sofia, Bulgaria, as a novice papal diplomat in April 1925, just two weeks after a terrorist attack at a church had targeted King Boris, who escaped unharmed. He was the first papal representative to come to Bulgaria in more than half a millennium, and after long centuries of bitter distrust, the newspaper of the Bulgarian Orthodox Holy Synod suspected the new apostolic visitor of bringing Latin imperialism and proselytism. In a most unpromising situation, Archbishop Roncalli immediately asked the king for permission to visit those who were wounded in the terrorist attack. Despite the difficult atmosphere of hostility, Roncalli sought again and again to get to know people as individuals, make connections, and establish relationships. When he moved to Istanbul as papal representative in 1935, he brought the same concrete concern to Muslims and Greek Orthodox Christians who also distrusted Catholics. Through his persistent, generous efforts, he succeeded in arranging for a representative of the Greek Orthodox Ecumenical Patriarch to attend the *Te Deum* celebrating the beginning of the pontificate of Pope Pius XII in 1939—the first time since the Great Schism of 1054 that this had occurred.

L. D. Lefebure (✉)
Georgetown University, Washington, DC, USA
e-mail: ll253@georgetown.edu

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Roncalli knew he could not single-handedly dismantle the many walls dividing Christians, but he was resolved to do what he could: "I try to pull out a brick here and there."¹ During the horrors of World War II, he did everything he could to rescue Jews in Eastern Europe from the Shoah. As a result of his service in Eastern Europe, he won the good will and respect of Orthodox Christians, Muslims, and Jews. In impossible situations marked by hostility and distrust, Roncalli brought generosity, trust, and concern inspired by the Gospel.

A few years later, as pontiff on a global stage, Pope St. John XXIII brought this spirit of generosity to all people of good will. In 1959 he announced the Second Vatican Council with the hope that it could contribute to the unity of Christians; a personal encounter in 1961 with French Jewish historian Jules Isaac persuaded him that the Council needed to reconsider relations with the Jewish people. When he formally convoked the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council on December 25, 1961, by issuing the Apostolic Constitution *Humanae Salutis* ("Of Human Salvation"), Pope John began with "painful considerations" concerning the crisis he saw underway in society at that time. Refusing to despair, he placed his confidence in the grace of God offered in Jesus Christ and made it clear that he was not calling the Council for Catholics alone, hoping that the Council could invite all people of good will "to turn their thoughts and proposals toward peace."²

His hopes for consideration of peace proved most timely, for the Second Vatican Council opened during the same month as the Cuban missile crisis, when Pope John played an important role in mediating between Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev and US President John F. Kennedy. In the atmosphere of the Cold War, often dominated by mistrust, tension, and threats of violence, Pope John opened the Council with a moving address filled with hope: *Gaudet Mater Ecclesia—Mother Church Rejoices!*

A few months later, for the first time in papal history Pope John addressed his final encyclical not only to Catholics but to all people of good will, officially promulgating *Pacem in Terris* (*Peace on Earth*), on Holy Thursday, April 11, 1963, just two months before his death. In the encyclical, John addressed the anxieties of a world on the brink of war and offered a moving meditation on hopes for peace, as well as on issues of

economic justice for the poor. For the first time in Catholic history, Pope John recognized the right of all persons to follow their conscience regarding their religious faith and practice. This groundbreaking encyclical succeeded in reaching a worldwide audience: it is still the only papal encyclical to have been set to music—as an oratorio by French Jewish composer Darius Milhaud. It is also the only papal encyclical that was published in its entirety in both the Soviet Union's *Pravda* and *The New York Times*.

Good Pope John pioneered a shift away from historical Catholic attitudes of distrust and hostility to the outside world and modeled a fundamental generosity and trust in the goodness of other people, even in impossible situations. This change in attitude offered a different perspective for appropriating the entire Catholic heritage; it called for different forms of action in the present and opened up unprecedented possibilities for more trusting relationships in the future. Perhaps Pope John's greatest contribution was to set in motion new ways of relating to persons beyond the boundaries of the Catholic Church. Even though these new patterns of relationships to others met with opposition in some quarters, they nonetheless flowed through the deliberations of the Council and found expression in its documents.

In the tense weeks of October 1962, no one could have foreseen all the twists and turns of the debates ahead, the heated discussions over developing better relations to other Christians, to followers of other religious paths, and to those who do not practice any religious tradition. By the time the Council ended on December 8, 1965, the Catholic Church had made a decisive shift in attitude from hostility to generosity, entering a new horizon of relationships with other Christians, with other religious traditions, and with all people of good will.

The conciliar documents have been read from many angles with many competing concerns, and various outcomes, and debates of interpretation continue to swirl. While some have emphasized the continuity between the Second Vatican Council and the earlier Catholic magisterial tradition, it is undeniable that the Council brought a new attitude to ecumenical and interreligious partners and also to those who do not follow any religious path. Gregory Baum believed that the change of perspective on Jews and Judaism constituted Vatican II's greatest transformation of the ordinary magisterium of the Catholic Church. The countless ecumenical and interreligious dialogues currently in progress around the world testify to the magnitude of the changes brought about by the Council, but one can

¹ Cited by Peter Hebblethwaite, *John XXIII: Pope of the Century* (London: Continuum, 2000), 78.

² John XXIII, Apostolic Constitution *Humanae Salutis*, AAS 54 (1962): 5–13, no. 9.

surmise that we are still in the beginning stages of appropriating the shift in relationships and perspectives. The new horizon calls for nothing less than a thoroughgoing rereading of the history of the Catholic Church, together with a far-reaching reimagining of future relations. The two volumes based upon the Ecclesiological Investigations Conference, "Vatican II: Remembering the Future – Ecumenical, Interreligious and Secular Perspectives on the Council's Impact and Promise," continue the process of discernment and debate over what happened at the Council and what its significance is for the present and future. No one can doubt that much has changed, but it is equally clear that formidable challenges remain.

At the present time we, like Angelo Roncalli/Pope John, face a series of intractable challenges arising from longstanding distrust and hostility. In many areas the legacy of the Second Vatican Council is in jeopardy, and one may be tempted to ask what difference the Council will have made in the long run of history. Anti-Semitism is once again increasing; Islamophobia dominates the attitudes of large numbers; in various regions of Asia there continue to be fierce tensions in relationships among Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims, and Christians. Distrust among Christians continues in some contexts, while religious freedom is frequently under assault. Widespread fear of migrants and foreigners poisons the atmosphere in some countries.

The difficulties of the present moment render the legacy of Vatican II all the more vital and the personal example of Angelo Roncalli more powerful than ever. John's style of reaching out to all people offers a model not only for the leaders of the Catholic Church, but also for partners from other traditions and for the entire world. It continues to challenge not only Catholics but all persons who consider his legacy and his contributions. Pope John taught the Council, the Catholic Church, and the world that in time of impossible dilemmas and dire threats, we can rejoice, read the signs of the times, and interpret our religious traditions anew in relation to the challenges of the present day. When facing walls of prejudice, animosity, and distrust, we may not have a solution to the situation as a whole; but rather than give in to despair, we can follow the lead of Angelo Roncalli: "I try to pull out a brick here and there."

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¹ Note: Page numbers followed by 'n' refer to notes.