

Towards a More Positive Appreciation of the Faith of Muslims: Theological Resolution of Vatican Ambivalence

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Abstract: *Dominus Iesus argues for a distinction between faith and belief in other religions. From a literal reading one would then conclude that Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs and Zoroastrians do not have faith, but only beliefs. Witnessing the devout lives of many Muslims through their prayer, fasting, almsgiving, pilgrimage and service to others (and the similar devotion of many believers from other religions), such a negative assessment is untenable. Moreover, it comes across as mean-spirited and lacking in openness to the presence and action of the Spirit and the Word in the other, both of which are clearly upheld in the teachings of the Second Vatican Council and the subsequent magisterium. I will show that the distinction between faith as "a personal adherence to God" and faith as "free assent to the whole truth that God has revealed" is best expressed in the now commonly accepted distinction between faith and beliefs. This enables a positive appreciation of the faith status of believers from other religions that is both solidly grounded in the Christian theological tradition without compromising doctrinal integrity and is at the same time open and receptive to the religious other.*

Key Words: Faith; Belief; Islam; Muslim; *Dominus Iesus*; Interreligious Dialogue; *Nostra Aetate*

The proper distinction between "faith" and "beliefs" enables a positive assessment of the faith status of Muslims (and of believers from other world religions and indeed of all people of goodwill). In so doing, it establishes a common horizon of faith within which Christians and Muslims (and believers from different religions) can meet. This is very important for interreligious dialogue, for when believers from different religions recognise and accept each other as faithful followers of God, despite their different beliefs and practices, they meet on level ground as equals. Further, this acknowledgement of faith inculcates a respect for the other which is sacred. This in turn opens up the dialogue to seek and discover the many and varied ways in which God is present and active in peoples' lives.¹

¹ List of Abbreviations:

AG *Ad Gentes Divinitus*: Decree on the Church's Missionary Activity, Vatican II

DI *Dominus Iesus: On the Unicity and Salvific Universality of Jesus Christ and the Church*, Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, 2000

DM *The Attitude of the Church Towards the Followers of Other Religions: Reflections and Orientations on Dialogue and Mission*, Secretariat for Non-Christians, 1984

DP *Dialogue and Proclamation: Reflections and Orientations on Interreligious Dialogue and the Proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ*, Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue and Congregation for Evangelization of Peoples, 1991

DV *Dei Verbum*: Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation" Vatican II

GS *Gaudium Et Spes*: Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, Vatican II

FAITH AND BELIEFS

The distinction between faith and beliefs was first articulated by W.C. Smith. In a 1968 lecture he described faith as a total, personal engagement with religious symbols quite distinct from “the imperatives, rituals, traditions, beliefs that inspire faith or are inspired by faith”.² Smith’s sustained reflections on the topic were published a decade later in his seminal work *Faith and Belief*.³

Raimon Panikkar also addresses the distinctiveness of faith and belief.⁴ For Panikkar, faith is an “existential openness toward transcendence”.⁵ It is “a constitutive human dimension” by which all peoples, cultures and religions are ontologically related to the Absolute.⁶ Belief is “an intellectual, emotional, and cultural embodiment of that faith within the framework of a particular tradition”.⁷ Hence his assertion that “beliefs divide, faith unites”.⁸

Bernard Lonergan makes a specific contribution by grounding this distinction—and the relation—between faith and beliefs in the dynamics of consciousness. In Lonergan’s analysis, consciousness operates in four distinct but related ways. The first way is in attending closely to all the relevant data of experience. Then in answer to the question “what?” the second way is understanding that data intelligently to form a possible hypothesis or explanation. Next, in answer to the question “is it so?” the third way is judging that hypothesis reasonably to affirm/deny its truth or falsity. Finally, in answer to the question “so what?” the person evaluates what he has affirmed and proves him/herself responsible by choosing to act accordingly or proves him/herself irresponsible by acting contrary. Based on this analysis, for Lonergan “faith” as personal adherence to God who reveals is a fourth-level choice, while the contents of what is believed are third-level judgments of religious facts or religious values.⁹

Thus faith is a fourth-level surrender to Divine Transcendence, entering into the limitless horizon of God within which the faithful can then under God’s inspiration establish correct beliefs, arrange them in an order of priority, and revise mistaken beliefs. From this analysis, faith may be common to adherents of all the world religions and to all people of good will, even if their expression of it is elementary and lacks the specificity that is proper to Christian faith. Thus, the adherents of different religions may be deemed “faithful” and their religions are

LG *Lumen Gentium*: Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, Vatican II

NA *Nostra Aetate*: Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions, Vatican II

RM *Redemptoris Missio*: On the Permanent Validity of the Church’s Missionary Mandate, John Paul II, 1990

² Bernard J.F. Lonergan, “Faith and Beliefs,” in *Philosophical and Theological Papers, 1965-1980*, Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan 17, ed. Robert C. Croken and Robert M. Doran (Toronto, Buffalo, London: University of Toronto Press, 2004), 30-48, at 31.

³ Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Faith and Belief* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979).

⁴ For treatment, see Raimon Panikkar, “Faith and Belief: A Multireligious Experience,” in *The Intra-Religious Dialogue* (New York; Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1999), 41-59; Raymond Panikkar, “Metatheology as Fundamental Theology,” in *Myth, Faith and Hermeneutics: Cross-Cultural Studies* (New York, Ramsey, Toronto: Paulist Press, 1979), 43-55; “Faith as a Constitutive Human Dimension,” in *Myth, Faith and Hermeneutics: Cross-Cultural Studies* (New York, Ramsey, Toronto: Paulist Press, 1979), 187-229.

⁵ Panikkar, “Faith as Constitutive,” 207.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 190.

⁷ Panikkar, “Faith and Belief,” 12.

⁸ Gerard Hall, “Editorial: The Indian Ocean Tsunami and the Broken Hallelujah,” *Australian eJournal of Theology*, 4/1 (2005).

⁹ For detailed argument see Bernard J.F. Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), 115-19.

properly named “faith traditions”—Aboriginal faith, Buddhist faith, Christian faith, Hindu faith, Muslim faith, and so on.

Further, since this horizon is without limit it embraces the many different particular religions, thus enabling the faithful from different religions to evaluate, refine, compare, contrast and correct their own and each other’s beliefs, such that building mutual understanding and cooperation between the different religions is properly named “interfaith dialogue” or “interfaith relations”.

Loneragan describes the benefit of his achievement as follows:

by distinguishing faith and belief we have secured a basis both for ecumenical encounter and for an encounter between all religions with a basis in religious experience. For in the measure that experience is genuine, it is orientated to the mystery of love and awe; it has the power of unrestricted love to reveal and uphold all that is truly good; it remains the bond that unites the religious community, that directs their common judgments, that purifies their beliefs. Beliefs do differ, but behind this difference there is a deeper unity. For beliefs result from judgments of value, and the judgments of value relevant for religious belief come from faith, the eye of religious love, an eye that can discern God’s self disclosures.¹⁰

In summary, faith establishes a common horizon in which believers from different religions can meet as equals, learn from each other’s beliefs, correct their own mistaken beliefs, and so grow in the knowledge and love of God.

HESITATION IN THE DOCUMENTS OF VATICAN II

However, it can be argued that the Vatican seems hesitant to accord faith to Muslims (and indeed to believers from any religion other than Christianity, with the exception of Judaism). In regard to Muslims, *Lumen Gentium*, Vatican II’s Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, states:

But the plan of salvation also includes those who acknowledge the Creator, first among whom are the Muslims: they profess to hold the faith of Abraham, and together with us they adore the one, merciful God, who will judge humanity on the last day. (LG 14)

Note that it does not state that “they hold the faith of Abraham”, but that “they profess to hold the faith of Abraham”. From this distancing or one step removal from the faith of Abraham one could argue that the Muslim “profession” of holding the faith of Abraham is a claim that can be disputed, that it may be shown to be spurious.

Similarly, *Nostra Aetate*, the Document on the Church’s Relation to Non-Christians states:

The church has also a high regard for the Muslims. They worship God, who is one, living and subsistent, merciful and almighty, the Creator of heaven and earth, who has also spoken to humanity. They endeavor to submit themselves without reserve to the hidden decrees of God, just as Abraham submitted himself to God’s plan, to whose faith Muslims eagerly link their own. (NA, 3)

Note that it does not state “whose faith they share”, but “to whose faith Muslims eagerly link their own.” Again, the use of the word “link” actually serves to distance the Muslims’ faith from that of Abraham and opens up the possibility of arguing that the link may possibly be tenuous.

¹⁰ Ibid., 119.

Both statements seem to express some reservation about the status of Muslim's faith, implying that it may not be identical with the faith of Abraham, which Christians claim as their own, even acknowledging him as "our father in faith" (Eucharistic Prayer I).¹¹

This reservation about faith is not confined to Muslims but extends to believers from all other religions except the Jews, with whom the Church claims a special affinity.¹² With the exception of *Nostra Aetate*, whose specific topic is the Church's relation with Non-Christian Religions, the documents of Vatican II rarely refer to other religions. When they do, they use euphemisms such as "the rites and customs of peoples" (LG, 17), "religious efforts" (AG, 3), "the particular customs and cultures of peoples" (AG, 9) - but they never refer to them as "faiths" or "faith traditions". In fact, the only time Vatican II documents us the word "faith" (and "revelation") in relation to other religions is with reference to the Jews. The relevant text is:

The Church of Christ acknowledges that in God's plan of salvation the beginnings of its faith and election are to be found in the patriarchs, Moses and the prophets. It professes that all Christ's faithful, who as people of faith are daughters and sons of Abraham (see Gal. 3:7) are included in the same patriarch's call, and that the salvation of the church is mysteriously prefigured in the exodus of the chosen people from the land of bondage. (NA, 4)¹³

Here it is clear that the ancient Israelites have "the beginnings of faith", that Christians are "faithful" and "people of faith" and as such they are "daughters and sons of Abraham." Unlike the more nuanced treatment of Muslims' faith detailed above, Christians do not "profess" to hold the faith of Abraham; there is no "linking" of Christian faith with that of Abraham. There is a simple identification of Christian faith with the faith of Abraham.

HESITATION IN THE VATICAN BUREAUCRACY

This reluctance to affirm that Muslims and others have faith is also expressed in naming structures within the Vatican bureaucracy. The department that deals with believers from other religions was originally called the Secretariat for Non-Christians, using a negative title. In June 1988 it was re-named by Pope John Paul II the *Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue*. Other Christian organisations were already using the expression "interfaith dialogue", as we shall see shortly, so he could have named it the *Pontifical Council for Interfaith Dialogue*, but he obviously preferred the adjective "interreligious" to "interfaith" to describe the relations between Christians and believers from other religions, in so doing possibly implying doubt about the faith status of Muslims and other believers.

¹¹ Other contentious issues—such as the Trinity and the role and identity of Jesus Christ—have made some question whether Christians and Muslims even worship the same God. However, despite apparent reservations about the faith response of Muslims, the above quotes clearly affirm that their faith is directed the one, living, God who is Creator and Judge.

¹² Further evidence of this special relationship between Christians and Jews is that the *Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews* comes rather surprisingly under the *Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity*, rather than the *Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue* where one would expect it to be.

¹³ The acknowledgement of revelation among the Jews is found in the continuation of this text:

On this account the Church cannot forget that it received the revelation of the Old Testament by way of that people with whom God in his inexpressible mercy established the ancient covenant. Nor can it forget that it draws nourishment from that good olive tree onto which the wild olive branches of the Gentiles have been grafted (see Rom 11:17-24). The Church believes that Christ who is our peace has through his cross reconciled Jews and Gentiles and made them one in himself (see Eph 2:14-16).(NA, 4)

Consistent with this, in Roman Catholic bureaucracy the preferred name for the diocesan and national agencies for relations with other believers is Commissions for Interreligious Dialogue or Interreligious Relations, not Interfaith Dialogue or Interfaith Relations.

Further, in its teaching documents and media statements the Vatican consistently refers to “interreligious dialogue”. In contrast, other churches (and believers from other religions) more frequently use the expression “interfaith dialogue” (and some who find the word “dialogue” too technical have opted for the softer, more human term “interfaith relations”).

All of the above contrast with the World Council of Churches, whose parallel body for dealing with believers from other religions formed in 1971 was called the Sub-Unit on Dialogue with People of Living Faiths and Ideologies. Also, its early documents reflect a similar acknowledgement of faith among other peoples, for example:

World Council of Churches. *Guidelines on Dialogue with People of Living Faiths and Ideologies*. Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1979.

World Council of Churches. *My Neighbour's Faith and Mine: Theological Discoveries through Interfaith Dialogue: A Study Guide*. Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1986.

Showing a similar acknowledgment of faith in Muslims and believers from other religions, the Uniting Church in Australia did not name the body that deals with them in terms of “religions” but named it the National Working Group on Relations with Other Faiths.¹⁴

HESITATION IN VATICAN PERSONNEL

The reluctance to acknowledge faith in others extends to Vatican personnel. In 2007, 138 Muslim religious leaders published *A Common Word*, an open letter to the Pope, to the heads of the Orthodox Churches, the Protestant Churches, the World Council of Churches and “to leaders of Christian Churches everywhere”. In a press interview with *La Croix* about the Catholic Church’s response to this Muslim invitation, Cardinal Jean-Louis Tauran, the President of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue was asked if theological dialogue was possible with other religions. He replied:

with some religions, yes. But with Islam, no, not at this time. Muslims do not accept the possibility of discussing the Quran, because it is written, they say, as dictated by God. With such a strict interpretation, it is difficult to discuss the content of the faith.¹⁵

Quite clearly the Cardinal was not rejecting all dialogue, but expressing a nuance about theological dialogue with Islam in the context of a particularly strict interpretation of the process of divine revelation in Islam. However, his subtle nuance was lost in the sensationalism of the press.

To be fair, the Cardinal was simply echoing the concerns of Pope Benedict XVI whose Regensburg lecture showed some ambivalence concerning Islam. In his first public meeting with Muslims in Cologne in August 2005 the Pope had categorically endorsed dialogue with Muslims. Interreligious and intercultural dialogue between Christians and Muslims cannot be reduced to

¹⁴ See <http://assembly.uca.org.au/rof/>.

¹⁵ “Scholars Troubled by Vatican Official’s Remarks on Muslim Dialogue”, 31 October, 2007, <http://www.catholicnews.com/data/stories/cns/0706200.htm>

an optional extra. It is in fact a vital necessity, on which in large measure our future depends.”¹⁶ By referring to both “interreligious” and “intercultural” dialogues the Pope acknowledges different forms of dialogues. This is in accord with the four-fold dialogue proposed in *Dialogue and Mission*¹⁷ and endorsed in *Dialogue and Proclamation*:

There exist different forms of interreligious dialogue. It may be useful to recall those mentioned by the 1984 document of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue (cf. *DM*, 28-35). It spoke of four forms, without claiming to establish among them any order of priority:

- a) The *dialogue of life*, where people strive to live in an open and neighbourly spirit, sharing their joys and sorrows, their human problems and preoccupations.
- b) The *dialogue of action*, in which Christians and others collaborate for the integral development and liberation of people.
- c) The *dialogue of theological exchange*, where specialists seek to deepen their understanding of their respective religious heritages, and to appreciate each other's spiritual values.
- d) The *dialogue of religious experience*, where persons, rooted in their own religious traditions, share their spiritual riches, for instance with regard to prayer and contemplation, faith and ways of searching for God or the Absolute.¹⁸

It is only with the third of these forms of dialogue that the Pope seemingly has reservations, as he made clear in 2008 in a letter addressed to Senator Marcello Pera which was published as the Foreword to the latter's book *Why We Must Call Ourselves Christians*. The Pope wrote:

Particularly meaningful for me too is your analysis of interreligious and intercultural dialogue. You explain with great clarity that an interreligious dialogue in the strict sense of the term is not possible, while you urge intercultural dialogue that develops the cultural consequences of the religious option which lies beneath. While a true dialogue is not possible about this basic option without putting one's own faith into parentheses, it's important in public exchange to explore the cultural consequences of these religious options. Here, dialogue and mutual correction and enrichment are both possible and necessary.¹⁹

It is clear that for the Pope interreligious dialogue “in the strict sense of the term” (presumably theological dialogue) involves putting one's faith aside. This compromise renders genuine dialogue impossible. However, the Pope's statement glosses over the other three forms of interreligious dialogue (of life, of action, of religious experience) and goes on to endorse dialogue about the cultural consequences of faith commitments. Thus his terminology shifts from interreligious dialogue to intercultural dialogue. Even more particularly, it makes that shift in reference to only one of the four dimensions of interreligious dialogue.

¹⁶ http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2005/august/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20050820_meeting-muslims_en.html

¹⁷ Secretariat for Non-Christians, *The Attitude of the Church Towards the Followers of Other Religions: Reflections and Orientations on Dialogue and Mission* (Strathfield, NSW: Columban Mission Institute, 2008).

¹⁸ World Council of Churches, "Ecumenical Considerations for Dialogue and Relations with People of Other Religions," <http://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/wcc-programmes/interreligious-dialogue-and-cooperation/interreligious-trust-and-respect/ecumenical-considerations-for-dialogue-and-relations-with-people-of-other-religions.html>; Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue and Congregation for Evangelization of Peoples, *Dialogue and Proclamation: Reflections and Orientations on Interreligious Dialogue and the Proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ* (Strathfield, NSW: Columban Mission Institute, 2008).

¹⁹ "Interreligious Dialogue Impossible, Pope says, but Intercultural Dialogue Good", <http://ncronline.org/print/12298>, 24 November 2008.

The consistency across the various speeches, comments and writings of these top-level Vatican personnel provide circumstantial evidence that they are very cautious about acknowledging faith in Muslims and believers from other religions.

HESITATION IN *DOMINUS IESUS*

Whatever theological nuances may be in the documents of Vatican II, the names of its bureaucracy and the statements of its personnel, the clearest reservation—refutation even—of faith in other religions is found in *Dominus Iesus: On the Unicity and Salvific Universality of Jesus Christ and the Church*. This was published in 2000 by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith which was headed at that time by the then Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger. Since Paragraph 7 is crucial to this topic I quote it in full:

The proper response to God's revelation is "the obedience of faith (*Rom* 16:26; cf. *Rom* 1:5, 2 *Cor* 10:5-6) by which man [*sic*] freely entrusts his entire self to God, offering 'the full submission of intellect and will to God who reveals' and freely assenting to the revelation given by him".²⁰ Faith is a gift of grace: "in order to have faith, the grace of God must come first and give assistance; there must also be the interior helps of the Holy Spirit, who moves the heart and converts it to God, who opens the eyes of the mind and gives 'to everyone joy and ease in assenting to and believing in the truth'".²¹

The obedience of faith implies acceptance of the truth of Christ's revelation, guaranteed by God, who is Truth itself:²² "Faith is first of all a personal adherence of man to God. At the same time, and inseparably, it is a *free assent to the whole truth that God has revealed*".²³ Faith, therefore, as "*a gift of God*" and as "*a supernatural virtue infused by him*",²⁴ involves a dual adherence: to God who reveals and to the truth which he reveals, out of the trust which one has in him who speaks. Thus, "we must believe in no one but God: the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit".²⁵

For this reason, the distinction between *theological faith* and *belief* in the other religions, must be *firmly held*. If faith is the acceptance in grace of revealed truth, which "makes it possible to penetrate the mystery in a way that allows us to understand it coherently",²⁶ then belief, in the other religions, is that sum of experience and thought that constitutes the human treasury of wisdom and religious aspiration, which man in his search for truth has conceived and acted upon in his relationship to God and the Absolute.²⁷

This distinction is not always borne in mind in current theological reflection. Thus theological faith (the acceptance of the truth revealed by the One and Triune God) is often identified with belief in other religions, which is religious experience still in search of the absolute truth and still lacking assent to God who reveals himself. This is one of the reasons why the differences between Christianity and the other religions tend to be reduced at times to the point of disappearance. (DI, 7) [*italics in original*]

²⁰ [DI's note] SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL, Dogmatic Constitution *Dei Verbum*, 5.

²¹ [DI's note] *Ibid.*

²² [DI's note] Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 144.

²³ [DI's note] *Ibid.*, 150.

²⁴ [DI's note] *Ibid.*, 153.

²⁵ [DI's note] *Ibid.*, 178.

²⁶ [DI's note] JOHN PAUL II, Encyclical Letter *Fides et Ratio*, 13.

²⁷ [DI's note] *Ibid.*, 31-32.

A literalist reading of this text leads inevitably to the conclusion that only Christians have faith; that believers in other religions do not have faith in the proper sense of the word, but only beliefs.

SUCH DENIAL OF FAITH IS PROBLEMATIC

This simplistic conclusion is problematic for several reasons.

First, denying the status of faith to Muslims (and believers from other religions) renders them “infidels”. This language is a throwback to the Middle Ages. At that time the Muslim powers were harrying the borders of Christendom. European aggression against these incursions peaked in the 11th – 13th centuries in the military expeditions known as the Crusades which aimed at restoring Christian rule in Jerusalem. During this period, as in all wars, it was customary to refer to the “enemy” in pejorative terms. The Christian Crusaders referred to Muslims as “infidels”, which means “without faith” or “faithless”. Hence, from the militant religious point of view prevailing in Christendom at that time, Muslims merited punishment, now in this life and in the life to come, and aggression against them was thus justified. This pejorative language forged the subconscious default position of the mentality of Christendom against the Islamic world. It re-surfaces today in the emotive reaction to atrocities committed by extremists in the name of Islam and unfairly applied to all Muslims.

Muslim history too, has negative stereotypes of Christians. “Kafir” was used in Prophet Muhammad’s time to refer to the Arab pagan polytheists who did not acknowledge the one God. The word literally means “ingrate”, one who does not give thanks. In the context of the Islam’s birth struggles against the Meccan oligarchy in 7th century Arabia, it referred to those who did not give thanks to God for the gifts of divine providence but heeded other gods. In subsequent Muslim history, kafir was sometimes used to refer to non-Muslims in general. It gathered even more emotive weight in the context of apartheid in South Africa where it was used by white settlers against the coloureds. The word is sometimes used today by extremist Muslims to refer to all non-Muslims, implying that they deserve the same fate as the ancient Meccan polytheists.

In the context of such pejorative name-calling, or at least the sub-conscious attitudes which underlie some of our mutual antipathies, clarity about the faith status of Muslims will help cool the passions and provide a better ground for mutual engagement.

Secondly, if Muslims (and believers from other religions) are without faith, then how do we account for the obvious good, including great spiritual wealth, found among them? I refer especially to Muslims’ devout observance of the Five Pillars of Islam: the *shahada* (translated as the “Testimony [of Faith]” – in the oneness of God and in Muhammad as the Prophet/Messenger of God), the five daily prayers, fasting from dawn to sunset during the month of Ramadan, and almsgiving.

This positive assessment of the religious practices of Muslims should not be a surprise, for the documents of Vatican II and the subsequent teaching of the magisterium clearly attest to the religious and spiritual truths and values found in other religions.

Nostra Aetate speaks of the presence in these traditions of “a ray of that Truth which enlightens all” (NA, 2). *Ad Gentes* recognizes the presence of “seeds of the word”, and points to “the riches which a generous God has distributed among the nations” (AG, 11). Again, *Lumen*

Gentium refers to the good which is "found sown" not only "in minds and hearts", but also "in the rites and customs of peoples" (LG, 17). (DP, 16).

Similarly, in Pope John Paul II's *Redemptoris Missio*

In Christ, God calls all peoples to himself and he wishes to share with them the fullness of his revelation and love. He does not fail to make himself present in many ways, not only to individuals but also to entire peoples through their spiritual riches, of which their religions are the main and essential expression, even when they contain "gaps, insufficiencies and errors. (RM, 55)

Thirdly, in contrast to the dire axiom *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* that marked much of the Church's history, Vatican II is clearly optimistic about the ultimate destiny of people of other religions (and none), as the following texts show:

Those who, through no fault of their own, do not know the Gospel of Christ or his church, but who nevertheless seek God with a sincere heart, and, moved by grace, try in their actions to do his will as they know it through the dictates of their conscience – these too may attain eternal salvation. (LG 16)

Referring to resurrection and the human destiny in Christ, *Gaudium et Spes* declares:

All this holds true not only for Christians, but for all people of good will in whose hearts grace works in an unseen way. For since Christ died for everyone, and since all are in fact called to one and the same destiny, which is divine, we must hold that the Holy Spirit offers to all the possibility of being made partners, in a way known to God, in the paschal mystery. (GS 22)

While it is commonly accepted that God wills the salvation of all, as attested in 1 Timothy 2:4, the author of the letter to Hebrews writes:

And without faith it is impossible to please God, for whoever would approach him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him. (Heb 11:6)

Since without faith it is impossible to please God, it would seem equally impossible to have any positive assurance of our own and others' eternal destiny without faith, especially when it is God who alone bestows the gift of faith that destines people for divine glory and gives the assurance of their and our hoped-for salvation.

Fourthly, there are only two instances in the New Testament where Jesus Christ is said to be surprised or astonished.²⁸ The first is he was amazed to find faith where he did not expect it, in the Roman Centurion's whose servant he had cured.

When Jesus heard him, he was amazed and said to those who followed him, "Truly I tell you, in no one in Israel have I found such faith. I tell you, many will come from east and west and will eat with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, while the heirs of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." (Mt 8:10-12)

The second is he was amazed not to find faith where he most expected it, among his own people at Nazareth:

And he could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them. And he was amazed at their unbelief. (Mk 6:5-6)

²⁸ Jose Kuttianimattathil sdb, "Jesus the Eminent Dialogue Partner," *Vidyajyoti* 66/7 (2002): 520-21.

So if the Church claims that she alone has faith and that others do not have faith, she too is destined, like her Founder, to be surprised and astonished to discover that this is not the case.

A SOLUTION

However, although the Vatican seems hesitant to affirm the presence of faith in Muslims and believers from other religions—and even seems to refute it—there is a solution. It is found in the most surprising place, in the very place where faith seems to be denied, in Paragraph 7 of *Dominus Iesus* quoted above. It hinges on the definition of the word “faith”.

Vatican II’s Dogmatic Constitution on Revelation, *Dei Verbum*, states:

By faith one freely commits oneself entirely to God, making “the full submission of intellect and will to God who reveals”,²⁹ and willingly assenting to the full revelation given by God. (DV, 5)

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states:

Faith is first of all a personal adherence of man [*sic*] to God. At the same time, and inseparably, it is a *free assent to the whole truth that God has revealed*. (CCC, 151) [*italics in original*]³⁰

Both of these definitions are quoted in paragraph 7 of *Dominus Iesus*. In these definitions it is clear that the word “faith” has two different meanings:

1. The first meaning of the word “faith” is the free committal of the self to God, the personal adherence to God, as stated above. It is personal *consent* to God Who touches and transforms the human being, making him/her into a new creation; it is consent to the heart of stone being removed and replaced with a heart of flesh (cf. Ez 11:19, 36:26); it is the personal surrender to God’s invitation; it is the “yes” of self-donation, the “*fiat*” of self-surrender to God’s purposes (cf. Lk 1:38, Mt 26: 39, 42). By the gift of God’s grace, the person now becomes “faith-filled” or “faithful”, and as such, “pleasing to God”, as stipulated by the author to the Hebrews quoted above. This is the constitutive dimension of faith.³¹
2. The second meaning of the word “faith” is inseparable from the first but distinct from it. As stated above, it is the willing *assent* to God’s revelation, the free *assent* to what God has revealed. It is the sum of the truths and values that God has made known. It is articulated in the various statements of belief, of doctrines and dogmas that the Church has judged to be true and good as guaranteed by God. This is the cognitive dimension of faith.

But these two inseparable but distinct meanings of the word “faith” correspond to the proper distinction between “faith” and “belief” that I argued in the first section of this paper.

²⁹ [*Dei Verbum’s* note] Vatican Council I, Dogmatic Constitution the Catholic Faith, *Dei Filius*, ch. 3: Denz. 1789 (3008).

³⁰ *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Homebush, NSW: St Pauls, 1994).

³¹ In using the word “constitutive” I am availing of Lonergan’s analysis of the four functions of meaning. They are 1) *cognitive* – that meanings can be known; 2) *efficient* – that meanings motivate us to act in certain ways to achieve particular ends; 3) *constitutive* – that meanings form a major part of our world; and 4) *communicative* – that we can communicate meanings to others so that they come to know and value the same world. For detailed treatment see “Functions of Meaning” in Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, 76-81.

On that basis, we now undertake a closer analysis of the problematic paragraph 7 of *Dominus Iesus* which seems to deny faith to believers from other religions and only allows them beliefs. We note again the words:

the distinction between *theological faith* and *belief* in the other religions, must be *firmly held*.

The adjective “theological” which qualifies the word “faith” suggests a human construct or expression or articulation of a truth about God, human beings, or the world. It is apparent that the word “faith” is used here in the second sense above. This is confirmed in the next sentence which reads:

If faith is the acceptance in grace of revealed truth, which “makes it possible to penetrate the mystery in a way that allows us to understand it coherently”³²...

The second sentence of the next paragraph provides further confirmation:

Thus theological faith (the acceptance of the truth revealed by the One and Triune God) ...

The text in inverted brackets—“(the acceptance of the truth revealed by the One and Triune God)” —explains what “theological faith” means. It is the second cognitive meaning, assent to what God has revealed.

Thus, what in effect *Dominus Iesus* states is that the truths and values that Christians hold to be revealed by God are different from the truths and values that other religions hold to be revealed by God; Christians believe different things about God, about human destiny, about the world - which is true.

But—and here is the crux of the matter—the declaration is silent on the first constitutive meaning of the word “faith” as defined above. It says nothing about the other believers’ consent to God who transforms their hearts and makes them a new creation, their personal surrender to the Mystery, however it appears to them. And as Robert Bolt’s Thomas Moore argues with Cromwell in “A Man For All Seasons”:

The maxim is “*Qui tacet consentire*”; the maxim of the law is “Silence gives consent”. If, therefore, you wish to construe what my silence betokened, you must construe that I *consented*, not that I denied.

Accordingly, one could argue that by its silence (about the first meaning of the word “faith”), *Dominus Iesus* must be construed as according faith to believers from other religions, that they are faith-filled or faithful, that they are not faithless, not “infidels”.

Admittedly, on its own, this negative argument by silence is a rhetorical device of limited merit. However, combined with the positive analysis of the two meanings of the word “faith” the argument becomes compelling. As I have shown, *Dominus Iesus* uses the expression “theological faith” to refer to the cognitive content of faith, the affirmations of truths and values revealed by God as articulated in the Christian tradition (and in other traditions?). This is more properly named “beliefs”. The other dimension of faith is primary and refers to the personal consent to God’s purposes, the confirmation of one’s being in God’s hands, as lived by countless millions of believers of all religions and none down through the ages which constitutes them as “faithful”,

³² [DI’s note] JOHN PAUL II, Encyclical Letter *Fides et Ratio*, 13.

no matter how well or how poorly they may articulate this personal transformation and the One who brought it about.

Since the use of the same word “faith” in two senses is vulnerable to mis-interpretation, a better solution is proper distinction between faith and beliefs as treated earlier. Applying this distinction to the text of *Dominus Iesus*, faith is the personal adherence to God who reveals and is proper to the faithful of all religions and to all people of goodwill. Theological faith, assent to what God reveals, is properly called belief. It is articulated with varying degrees of adequacy in the teachings of the various founders and authorities of the different religions and in its fullness in Christ’s teaching as handed down in the Church.

BELIEF

Before I conclude, the summary treatment of belief in other religions in *Dominus Iesus* warrants comment. It states:

belief in other religions ... is religious experience still in search of the absolute truth and still lacking assent to God who reveals himself. This is one of the reasons why the differences between Christianity and the other religions tend to be reduced at times to the point of disappearance.

This is the classical fulfilment theory, that other religions are the result of the human quest for God, but Christianity is the God-given answer to that human search. The former is an “upwards” ascent that can never attain God; the latter is the “downwards” divine condescension that “fulfils” the religious quest.³³

However, treatment of the provenance of the beliefs of other religions needs to be more nuanced. Vatican II clearly taught that God is present to believers in other religions; has bestowed gifts on them; and that they reflect a “ray of that Truth which enlightens all men and women” (cf. NA, 2; AG, 9, 11; LG, 17). Accordingly, their affirmations are not just mere human constructs, but a seed of the Word and a fruit of the Spirit, even if they lack the fullness of revelation that is proper to the incarnate Word (cf. RM, 5-6) and the personal quality of inspiration that is the proper to the Spirit (cf. RM, 29).

Thus beliefs in other religions need to be discerned, affirming whatever is true and good and valuable and holy (cf. LG, 16, 17; AG, 9, 11; NA, 2), and purifying, raising up and perfecting whatever is deficient or inadequate or wrong (cf. LG, 17; AG, 9). In the process, the Catholic Church’s beliefs too may be refined, not that they lack anything, but that our understanding of them could be deepened in the light of new perspectives so that our appropriation of them

³³ The classic fulfilment theory is enunciated very eloquently in Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi: On Evangelisation in the Modern World* (Homebush, NSW: St. Paul Publications, 1975), 53. The same position is taken more recently by Pope John Paul II, who presents it through a Christocentric lens. “Here we touch upon *the essential point by which Christianity differs from all other religions*, by which *man’s [sic] search for God* has been expressed from earliest times. Christianity has its starting point in the Incarnation of the Word. Here, it is not simply a case of man seeking god, but of God who comes in person to speak to man of himself and to show him the path by which he may be reached. This is what is proclaimed in the Prologue of John’s Gospel: ‘No one has ever seen God; the only son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known’ (1:18). *The Incarnate Word is that the fulfilment of the yearning present in all the religions of mankind*; this fulfilment is brought about by God himself and transcends all human expectations. It is the mystery of grace. In Christ, religion is no longer a ‘blind search for God’ (cf. Acts 17:27) but the *response of faith* to God who reveals himself.” (John Paul II, *Tertio Millennio Adveniente: The Third Millennium* (Strathfield: St Pauls Publications, 1994), 6. [italics in original])

could be improved and better expressed for ourselves and for our dialogue partners in other religions (cf. GS, 44).

CONCLUSION

On the basis of this proper distinction between faith and beliefs, we can now affirm that Muslims (and believers in other world religions and indeed all people of good will) are not “infidels” but they are “faithful”. More importantly, we can justify this claim theologically.

The importance of raising and answering this question in positive theological terms is that Christians can no longer relegate Muslims to outsider or alien status, but must engage with them on an equal footing as faithful followers of the one God, even as we express our fidelity differently in our different traditions.

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