

Catholic Teaching on Other Faiths

Peter Evans, 6 August 2007

This briefing note covers both contemporary teaching of the Catholic Church on other faiths and some of the historical perspectives which led up to this. It finishes with a prayer for all. It is important to note that this is an area of ongoing dialogue and development of theology and missiology in the Church. So this represents my personal views; it is not authoritative.

1. Contemporary Teaching – 2nd Vatican Council

Contemporary teaching starts from the watershed declarations of the 2nd Vatican Council (1962-1965), which was the first Ecumenical Council to deal directly with the other (non-Christian) religions. Some key statements and teachings include:

- a. *Nostra Aetate* (Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions) covers Jews (the original intent) and also Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists.
 - i. All people on earth with their various religions form one community (Acts 17:26-28).
 - ii. We reject nothing of what is true and holy in these religions.
 - iii. On Hinduism and Buddhism: We have a high regard for the manner of life and conduct, the precepts and doctrines which, although differing in many ways from our own teaching, often reflect a ray of that truth which enlightens all men. Yet we proclaim, and are in duty bound to proclaim without fail, Christ who is “the way, the truth and the life” (Jn 14:6). In him, in whom God reconciled all things to himself (cf. 2 Co 5:18-19), we find the fullness of our religious life.
 - iv. On Islam: We have also a high regard for the Muslims. They worship God, the Creator of heaven and earth, who has also spoken to men. They strive to submit themselves without reserve to the hidden decrees of God, as did Abraham, to whose faith Muslims link their own. Although not acknowledging him as God, they venerate Jesus as a prophet and honour his mother. They await the day of judgement and the reward of God. They highly esteem an upright life and worship God, especially by prayer, almsgiving and fasting.
 - v. On Judaism: The people of the New Covenant are linked spiritually to the stock of Abraham, as the beginnings of our faith are found in the patriarchs, Moses and the prophets. We remember we received the revelation of the Old Testament by way of that people with whom God established the ancient covenant. We believe that Christ, who is our peace, has, through his cross, reconciled Jews and Gentiles and made them one in himself (cf. Ep 2:14-16). Christ, the apostles and many of the early disciples are of Jewish descent. While Jerusalem did not recognise God’s moment when it came (cf. Lk 19:44), and many Jews did not accept the Gospel and opposed spreading it (cf. Rm 11:28) we acknowledge that the Jews remain dear to God since God does not take back the gifts He bestowed or the choice He made (cf. Rm 11:28-29). Even though the Jewish authorities and those who followed their lead pressed for the death of Christ (cf. Jn 19:6), neither all Jews indiscriminately then, nor Jews today, can be charged with the crimes committed during his passion. The Jews should not be spoken of as rejected or accursed, as if this followed from Holy Scripture.
 - vi. We reject, as foreign to the mind of Christ, any discrimination against people or any harassment of them based on their race, colour, condition in life or religion.
- b. *Lumen Gentium* (Dogmatic Constitution on the Church).
 - i. The followers of other religions can be saved (LG 16).
 - ii. 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, may achieve eternal salvation (LG 16).
 - iii. The Church has a mission to proclaim the Gospel so all may hear it (LG 17).

- c. *Dignitatis Humanae* (Declaration on Religious Freedom: On the Right of the Person and Communities to Social and Civil Freedom in Matters Religious). The Catholic Church was 'late' in acknowledging the validity of the principle of religious freedom, which had long been recognised in constitutional law. This declaration resolved a long-standing ambiguity (double standard): freedom for the Church when Catholics were a minority, privilege for the Church and intolerance for others when Catholics were a majority.
- i. People have a right to religious freedom, meaning all should be immune from coercion on the part of individuals, social groups and every human power so that, within due limits, nobody is forced to act against his or her convictions in religious matters in private or in public, alone or in association with others. This right must be given recognition in the constitutional order of society (DH 2).
 - ii. The search for truth in religious matters must be carried out in a way appropriate to the dignity of humans and their social nature, i.e., by free enquiry with the help of teaching or instruction, communication and dialogue (DH3).
 - iii. People cannot be forced to act against their conscience, nor can they be prevented from acting according to it, especially in religious matters (DH 3).
 - iv. The freedom or immunity from coercion in religious matters which is the right of individuals must also be accorded to men and women when they act in community. Provided the requirements of public order are not violated, these groups have a right to immunity so they may organise themselves according to their own principles. These include the right to worship publicly; provide religious instruction; select, train, appoint and transfer their ministers; and acquire and use property and erect buildings for religious purposes (DH 4).
- d. *Ad Gentes* (Decree on the Missionary Activity of the Church).
- i. The Church has the obligation and sacred right to evangelise, so its missionary activity retains its full force and necessity as the Gospel must be preached to all peoples and nations before the Lord comes again (AG 7, AG 9, cf. Mk 13:10).
 - ii. To bear witness to Christ, Christians should establish relationships of respect and love with those around them, they should acknowledge themselves as members of the group in which they live, and through the various affairs of human life they should share in their social and cultural life (AG 11).
 - iii. The Church strictly forbids that anyone should be forced to accept the faith or be induced or enticed by unworthy devices (AG 13).
 - iv. Priests and laity performing missionary activity should understand and appreciate the culture and society where they operate, and the philosophy and theology of the religions and traditions with which they interact (AG 16).
- e. *Gaudium et Spes* (Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World).
- i. The Church is universal as it is not committed to any one culture or to any political, economic or social system. So the Church calls upon its members and upon all to put aside all conflict between nations and races (GS 42).
 - ii. The Church has existed through the centuries in varying circumstances and has used the resources of different cultures in its preaching to spread and explain the message of Christ. Nevertheless, the Church has been sent to all ages and nations and, therefore, is not tied exclusively to any race or nation, to any one particular way of life, or any customary practices, ancient or modern (GS 58).
 - iii. Many people are eager to ensure the rights of minorities in their country are protected, without overlooking the duties of minorities to the political community. There is also an increase in tolerance for others who differ in religion (GS 73).
 - iv. Our thoughts also go out to all who acknowledge God and who preserve the precious religious and human elements in their traditions. Since God the Father is the beginning and the end of all things, we are all called to be brothers and sisters; we ought to work together without violence and without deceit to build up the world in a spirit of genuine peace (GS 92).

2. Contemporary Teaching – Other Papal and Magisterial Teaching

- a. *Ecclesiam Suam* (Encyclical of Pope Paul VI, 1964).
 - i. This encyclical from the Catholic Church's 'Father of Dialogue' covers four categories of dialogue in which the Church should engage: 1) with the world and cultures; 2) with other religions; 3) with other Christians; and 4) within the Church.
 - ii. We cannot share in the forms of religion of Muslims or the great Afro-Asiatic religions, nor can we remain indifferent to the fact that each of them should regard itself as being the equal of any other. However, honesty compels us to declare openly our conviction that there is but one religion, the religion of Christianity. It is our hope that all who seek God may come to acknowledge its truth. We recognise and respect the moral and spiritual values of the various non-Christian religions, and we desire to join with them in promoting common ideals of religious liberty, human brotherhood, good culture, social welfare and civil order.
- b. *Redemptor Hominis* (Encyclical of Pope John Paul II, 1979).
 - i. Coming together with representatives of non-Christian religions is expressed through dialogue, contacts, prayer in common and investigation of the treasures of human spirituality in which, as we know well, members of these religions also are not lacking.
 - ii. The 2nd Vatican Council document on non-Christian religions is filled with deep esteem for the great spiritual values, indeed for the primacy of the spiritual, which in the life of humankind finds expression in religion and then in morality, with direct effects on the whole of culture. The Fathers of the Church rightly saw in the various religions so many reflections of the one truth, attesting that, though the routes taken may be different, there is but a single goal to which is directed the deepest aspiration of the human spirit.
- c. *Redemptoris Missio* (Encyclical of Pope John Paul II, 1990).
 - i. The Church's relationship with other religions is dictated by a twofold request: "Respect for the person in his/her quest for answers to the deepest questions of life, and respect for the action of the spirit in humanity." Yet "although the Church gladly acknowledges whatever is true and holy in the religious traditions of Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam as a reflection of that truth which enlightens all people, this does not lessen her duty and resolve to proclaim without fail, Jesus Christ who is 'the way, and the truth and the life.'"
- d. *Tertio Millenio Adveniente* (Apostolic Exhortation of Pope John Paul II, 1994).
 - i. During the 2nd Vatican Council, the Church questioned its own identity and discovered anew the depth of her mystery as the body and bride of Christ. She rediscovered Episcopal collegiality, allowing the Council to open itself up to Christians of other denominations, to the followers of other religions, and to all the people of our time.
- e. *Ecclesia in Africa* (Post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation of Pope John Paul II, 1995).
 - i. Catholics are invited to develop an ecumenical dialogue with all their baptised brothers and sisters of Christian denominations, so the unity for which Christ prayed may be achieved. Such dialogue can be conducted through ecumenical translations of the Bible, theological studies of various dimensions of the Christian faith or by bearing common evangelical witness to justice, peace and respect for human dignity. Together, Christians are responsible for the witness to be borne to the Gospel.
- f. *Ecclesia in Asia* (Post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation of Pope John Paul II, 1999).
 - i. Asia is the cradle of the world's major religions – Judaism, Christianity, Islam and Hinduism. It is the birthplace of other spiritual traditions such as Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism, Zoroastrianism, Sikhism and Shintoism. The Church has the deepest respect for these traditions and seeks to engage in sincere dialogue with their followers.
 - ii. The scandal of a divided Christianity is a counter-witness to Jesus Christ. The Catholic Church feels impelled to work for unity with other Christians, realising that the search for full communion demands from everyone charity, discernment, courage and hope. To bear fruit, ecumenism requires certain basic dispositions by the Catholic faithful: 1) charity that shows itself in a lively desire to cooperate wherever possible with the faithful of other Churches; 2) fidelity towards the Catholic Church, without ignoring or denying the shortcomings of some members; 3) a spirit of discernment to appreciate all that is good and worthy of praise. While recognising the difficulties still existing in the relationships between Christians, which involve not only prejudices inherited from the past but also judgements rooted in profound convictions which involve conscience, relations have improved among some Christian Churches and Ecclesial Communities.

3. Historical Perspectives

Sadly, the open and inclusive spirit shown in the 2nd Vatican Council and since is not reflected consistently throughout the history of the Church. A brief summary of earlier influences, teachings and activities, and some of the issues associated with them follows:

- a. *The Early Christians* (30 C.E. – 100 C.E.).
 - i. The Jewish Influence: Inheriting the Jewish notion of 'chosenness,' the Christian community was endowed with a sense of mission. From the Rabbinical and Pharasaic heritage, the Christians developed a rather exclusivistic attitude in their relations with people of other religions. The early Christians felt marginalised and threatened by the Jewish community and were defensive in their relations with it.
 - ii. The Greek Influence: Christians adopted Greek philosophies but rejected Greek religions and some moral principles. From the Hellenistic-Jewish circles, the early Christians developed a more dialogical attitude towards other religions and cultures.
 - iii. The Roman Influence: The Romans promoted an imperial cult to sustain the internal order and support their expansionism, so looked down upon Christian communities who they judged as seditious organisations with no respect for Roman religious practices. Christians saw dialogue with the persecutors as compromising in their faith response.
- b. *The Witnessing Phase* (100 C.E.–430 C.E.): fidelity to the person and message of Jesus. (By the end of this period, 'most of the windows of the Church became closed until some were opened again fifteen hundred years later at the Second Vatican Council.')

 - i. Justin Martyr: Used the Greek notion of *logos*: the creative self-expression of the divine mystery present in the entire creation and hence at work in all people at all times, and made manifest in Christianity through its embodiment in Jesus Christ.
 - ii. Clement of Alexandria: Alexandria was the great centre of Hellenistic wisdom and a meeting place of many cultures. A passionate search for Truth beyond all religious and cultural barriers characterised the intellectual climate there. Clement believed the fulfilment of Greek wisdom is to be found in the Christian faith.
 - iii. Augustine: He saw Christ as the universal saviour at work in the hearts of all people and hence in all religions and cultures. The community of the saved embraces all people from the beginning of the human race. The Church is the universal community of salvation, allowing a perspective that other religions are integral parts of the one plan of salvation. Later, in confronting Pelagius, Augustine advocated a more exclusivistic ecclesiology, upholding the absolute power of God's grace, which alone saves humanity. His predestination theory outlined that God predestined some for salvation and others for damnation, some for the Church and others for other religions. The part of humanity lost without grace came to be identified with believers of other religions.
 - iv. Fulgentius of Raspe: A follower of Augustine, made statements leading to the axiom that 'outside the Church there is no salvation.' This contributed to the growth of a negative attitude of Christians towards other religions.

- c. *The Conversion Phase* (430 C.E.-1000 C.E.): the persecuted Church underwent a conversion and emerged as the Imperial Church – the focus shifted from a concentration on Christ to a concentration on the mother Church.
 - i. From the Catacombs to the Throne: The persecuted religion became the official religion of the Roman Empire; the minority community evolved into the dominant power block, not only for religion, but also in politics, economics and culture.
 - ii. Follow the Religion of the Ruler: This led to mass conversions as Christians from the south of Europe moved northwards. The rituals, customs and worship centres of the northern tribes were mercilessly destroyed in favour of Romanised Christianity.
 - iii. Roman Law and Order: The Roman sense for law and order prevailed upon the entire western Church, limiting creative theological searching, and leading to intellectual stagnancy in the Church. As the Church became introverted, focusing on organisation and expansion, the attitude to other religions became totally negative. Christians could no longer see that Jews, and later Muslims, belonged to the people of God.
 - iv. Rome versus Constantinople: Tension between the two poles of Christianity grew in unchristian ways through mutual suspicion, competition and condemnation, eating up the spiritual marrow of the 'universal' Church. Both poles became defensive and assertive in relation to other religions.

- d. *The Crusades Phase* (1000 C.E.-1450 C.E.): the separation of the western and eastern poles of Christianity weakened the imperial power of the Church. Islam emerged as a military threat to Christianity and Christians faced it in a militant way. With the conviction that Christianity is the only true religion, crusaders, motivated not just by religion but also seeking new lands to conquer and control, converted the cross into a dagger and met the Muslims brutally. The entire attitude of the Church towards believers of other religions became entirely negative, even aggressive.
- i. The Threat of Islam: The Church saw Muslims primarily as conquerors, destroyers of the sacred places related to the life of Jesus and a military threat to the integrity of Christian Europe / the Holy Roman Empire. Christians could not perceive anything good in Islam; this decisively shaped the attitude of the Church to other religions. The axiom 'outside the Church no salvation' became a political ideology. The Crusaders claimed that 'God fights on our side,' and Jesus was looked upon mainly as the Lord and King who protected the interests of the militant Church, including her political and economic concerns. When theological perspectives were mixed with vested interests one cannot expect any openness to the universal plan of God in which other religions have a positive role to play, although there were a few theological dissenters, e.g.,
 - ii. Nicholas of Cusa (d. 1464): He found the insane wars between Christians and Muslims were caused by mutual prejudices and misconceptions and a tendency to assert one's own religion as the absolute norm for all. He studied Islam and the Holy Qur'an, concluding no religion is absolute. None could claim to have comprehended the Divine fully; every religion contains parts of revelation and each is to be understood in relation with the others. He sought to open Christian theology to the universality of God's plan of salvation and help Christians to be more tolerant of believers of other religions.
 - iii. Pope Boniface VIII: In *Unam Sanctum* (1302) advocated a radically exclusivistic outlook, "That there is only one holy, catholic and apostolic Church we are compelled by faith to believe and hold, and we firmly believe in her and sincerely confess her, outside of whom there is neither salvation nor remission of sins."
 - iv. The Council of Florence (1442): This upheld the dogma of the primacy of the Roman Pontiff and demanded that the Greek orthodox Churches submit to the Pope, through decreeing, "The holy Roman Church firmly believes, professes and preaches that no one remaining outside the Catholic Church, not only pagans but also Jews, heretics or schismatics, can partake of eternal life." The axiom 'outside the Church no salvation' so achieved some force, although it was never a *de fide* statement of the Church. This was also the first use of the derogatory term 'pagan' in a Church document.
- e. *The Mission Phase* (1450 C.E.-1950 C.E.): The discovery of the Americas, Afro-Asiatic regions and India, combined with an urge to spread Christianity beyond Europe meant most early missionary work was supported by colonial powers. The theology, spirituality, pastoral methods and administrative structures of the Church came from the monoculture of Europe and were not readily integrated with the cultures of Africa and Asia. Missionaries were not theologically or psychologically prepared to respect believers of other religions as co-pilgrims or to learn from them. Christ was brought as the messianic King.
- i. The Council of Trent (1545-1563): (Regarding non-Christian faiths): tried to reconcile the universality of God's love with the necessity of the Church for salvation. Pagans following their conscience and living an upright life were assumed to desire to enter the Church, which was still the only ark of salvation.
 - ii. The Enlightenment: The exclusivistic claim about the Catholic Church as the sole source of salvation came under criticism during the Reformation and in the wake of the Enlightenment. Official Church responses to the denial of the Church as the sole possessor of the normative revelation of God in Christ were "rather negative."
 - iii. Pope Gregory XVI (1831-1846): In *Singulari Nos* (1832), he wrote "Indifferentism [is] that wrong opinion by which man can attain the eternal salvation of his soul by any profession of faith, provided his moral conduct conforms to the norms of right and good."
 - iv. Pope Pius IX (1846-1878): He condemned in harsh words all attempts of advocating the equality of religions, stating that, "no one can be saved outside the apostolic Roman Church." In the *Syllabus of Errors* (1864), responding to liberal ideologies emerging in Europe, he condemned many major "errors" of the time. These errors included:

1. Everyone is free to embrace and profess the religion which by the reason of light he judges to be true;
 2. People can find the way to eternal salvation by the practice of any religions;
 3. We should have good hopes for the eternal salvation of those who are in no way in the true Church of Christ;
 4. The Church has no power to define dogmatically that the religion of the Catholic Church is the only true religion.
- v. Pope Leo XIII (1878-1903): He invited Orthodox Christians and Protestants – our ‘separate brethren’ – to reunite with Rome, as long as they submitted to it. He also held that no one could be forced to join the Catholic Church against his or her will.
 - vi. Pope John XXIII (1958-1963): He had a keen interest in Christian unity and established a Secretariat for it in 1960. He also sought enthusiastically to modernise the Church, leading to the Second Vatican Council.
- f. *In Summary*
- i. The Conquest Mode: The Church has for most of its history been in this mode: perceiving other religions as in error or false, and seeking to conquer and replace the other religions. The question of dialogue with other religions was not even considered as there was nothing to discuss if they were in error!
 - ii. The Fulfilment Mode: Post Vatican II, the Church has moved into a mode of perceiving other religions as true, but only partially and without the fullness of that Truth. So it seeks to heal, fulfil, perfect, enlighten and purify. Dialogue has the goal of learning more about other religions to see where they are incomplete or imperfect, enabling better proclamation of the Gospel.
 - iii. The Partnership Mode: This would be based on a perception that other religions are genuine and true in their own right, just as the Church is true and would like others to acknowledge Christianity as true. It would enable an attitude seeking cooperation and collaboration. This requires a radical transformation in the Church’s attitude so it no longer needs to claim superiority. This transformation is challenging and ongoing.

4. *Some comments on Ecumenism and Ecumenical Activities*

This briefing note has focused primarily on the relationship between the Catholic Church and non-Christian religions. Christianity as a religion has had disagreements, divisions and schisms since its earliest times and the progressive separation between the western and eastern (Orthodox) churches. Further splits happened during the Reformation, which was triggered by the actions of Luther and then others, especially Zwingli and Calvin, and the response of the ‘Catholic’ Church, especially at the Council of Trent. Church Councils from Nicea (325 C.E.) up to and including the First Vatican Council (1869-1870 C.E.) attempted to find and uphold ‘the single truth’ but also generally took an exclusivistic approach to those ruled ‘in error’.

Some differences are rooted in historical misunderstanding or on personalities and egos, others are doctrinal (e.g., the nature and form of Communion and Baptism, approaches to interpretation of the Bible, theologies of justification and predestination, the nature of the Trinity), others refer to practice and structure (e.g., the role of a teaching authority and tradition (The Pope and Magisterium in the Catholic Church) instead of individual relationship with God allowing personal interpretation or that by a group of elders, the conflict between the roles of spiritual and temporal rule), and yet others are culturo-historical, sometimes in turn based on dogma, structure or practice. At the personal level, and with the hindsight of historical perspective, Martin Luther’s attack on the Papal Court and its corrupt practice of selling papal indulgences to help finance the Church and the building of new churches seems entirely appropriate!

The term “Ecumenism” comes from the Greek *oikumene*, meaning inhabited, and referring to the whole inhabited earth as home. It has been used for almost a century now to denote a movement for the unity of all Christians, although the contemporary movement started outside the Catholic Church. Attainment of unity should be the desire of all Christians because, even though we are divided, we all confess our faith in the Lord Jesus Christ as God and Saviour according to the Scriptures and are committed to the mission of proclaiming the Gospel message to the whole world. Yet we do not see clearly the type of unity we should seek.

a. *Possible models for Christian unity*

- i. Absorption: A return of all Christians or Churches to obedience to the Roman Pontiff. Although the view of the Catholic Church for many years, this is considered now (by most) as outmoded. Apart from the improbability of it happening anyway, it would betray the ecumenical spirit.
- ii. Mutual recognition of diversity and a mutual sharing in the Eucharist
- iii. Organic unity: Several Churches come to an agreement on faith, sacraments and ministry, and enter into a new organisation that embraces all.
- iv. Fellowship: Able to accommodate diverse historical denominations and spiritual traditions, in which unity is expressed in a central core of faith, a common sacramental life entered into at baptism and celebrated by a shared Eucharist, and the mutual recognition of ministries.
- v. Conciliar Fellowship: The unity of Churches is expressed also in occasional meetings of representatives of the Churches, either episcopal or including the laity.

5. *Prayer for the Knox Inter-faith Network*

Leader: The Catholic Church urges all her sons and daughters to enter with prudence and charity into discussion and collaboration with members of other religions:

Respondents: Let us all, of any faith, while witnessing to our own faith and way of life, acknowledge, preserve and encourage the spiritual and moral truths found among anyone of faith, and also their social life and culture. May this guide us in our prayers, thoughts and activities within this Knox Inter-faith Network as we seek to enhance the understanding of each community in the Network of the faiths of all other communities in the Network.

Leader: Over the centuries many quarrels have arisen between Christians and Muslims:

Respondents: May all affected by the memory of this sad period acknowledge it, but also make a sincere effort to achieve mutual understanding; for the benefit of all women and men, let us work together to preserve and promote peace, liberty, social justice and moral values.

Leader: For the unity of Christians:

Respondents: Let us pray for all brothers and sisters who share our faith in Jesus Christ, that God may gather and keep together in one Church all those who seek the truth with sincerity. May God keep together those who have united, look kindly on all who follow Jesus, make us one in the fullness of faith and keep us one in the fellowship of love.

6. *Reference and Source*

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