

## ***Religiones Antiquae: Reviving Nostra Aetate to Expand the Scope of Salvation “History”***

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*The Second Vatican Council’s Declaration on the Relation of the Church with Non-Christian Religions (Nostra Aetate) is better understood as a document about the Catholic Church than about other religions. Nostra Aetate’s most important value is what its assertions mean about the Body of Christ, rather than about those who are not Christian. This does not mean that the Declaration is not a positive asset for interreligious relations. In fact, it is the ecclesiology of Nostra Aetate that can serve as a foundation for a more productive phase of interreligious dialogue and comparative theology in the twenty-first century. Applying the insights of Raimundo Panikkar on Hinduism and Robert Magliola on Buddhism to Nostra Aetate provides an opportunity to broaden the Church’s construction of salvation history. In the twenty-first century, the Catholic Church must try to forge a shared understanding of salvation history with Hindus and Buddhists.*

In its opening paragraph, Vatican II’s Declaration on the Church’s Relation to Non-Christian Religions presumed that “the human race is being daily brought closer together.”<sup>1</sup> *Nostra Aetate* ushered in an era of good feeling and dealt a blow to Christian justifications for anti-Semitism; by this standard the document has been a success. While the declaration broke new ground in paying respect to non-Christian religions, as Augustin Cardinal Bea noted before the final vote on it in October 1965, its presentation of religious others is brief, abstract, and shorn of overt references to historical developments in both Christianity and other traditions. Those disappointed with the brevity of the document should note that a more extensive text could have been a more negative one: according to Cardinal Bea’s *Relatio*, before the final vote some bishops wanted to include criticism of the various errors of non-Christian religions.<sup>2</sup> The declaration gave theologians impetus for pursuing interreligious dialogue, but provided few specifics for precisely how to move from mere good will to constructive interreligious engagement. An optimistic appraisal of *Nostra Aetate* can explain such limitations and the Declaration’s brevity as the expected outcome of a document intended to be simply the beginning of an extensive program of ecclesiological renewal. One can justify this positive assessment with reference to subsequent magisterial documents such as John Paul II’s 1984 address, *The Attitude of the Church towards the Followers of Other Religions: Reflections and Orientations on Dialogue and Mission*, or the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue’s 1991 document *Dialogue and Proclamation*.<sup>3</sup> Both of these documents reaffirmed the necessity for interreligious dialogue in

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<sup>1</sup> All quotations from Vatican II documents in this essay have been taken from *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, vol. 2, trans. Norman P. Tanner (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1990). Different translations from the documents of Vatican II may be found online at the Vatican’s website: [www.vatican.va](http://www.vatican.va).

<sup>2</sup> See René Laurentin and Joseph Neuner, commentary on *Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions* at Vatican Council II (Glen Rock, NJ: Paulist, 1966), 87.

<sup>3</sup> For the former document, see the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue’s website at [http://www.pcinterreligious.org/dialogue-and-mission\\_75.html](http://www.pcinterreligious.org/dialogue-and-mission_75.html); the latter may be found at [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/pontifical\\_councils/interelg/documents/rc\\_pc\\_interelg\\_doc\\_19051991\\_dialogue-and-proclamatio\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/interelg/documents/rc_pc_interelg_doc_19051991_dialogue-and-proclamatio_en.html).

principle. These statements from the Vatican, however, appear primarily concerned with organizing the Church’s own self-understanding in the face of interreligious dialogue; this inward-looking trend was confirmed with the release of *Dominus Iesus* by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in 2000.<sup>4</sup> These documents do not aim at doctrinal consensus or, with the exception of the Roman Catholic dialogue with Judaism, anything approaching a shared theology of religious history. Nothing of comparable importance with the 1999 Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification by the Lutheran World Federation and the Catholic Church has emerged from Catholic interreligious dialogue since the end of Vatican II.<sup>5</sup> In one of his last published works, Jacques Dupuis wrote of the “disillusionment and dissatisfaction” he felt on reading some conciliar treatments of other religions.<sup>6</sup>

I suggest that one of the reasons for this disillusionment is that scholars have yet to appreciate sufficiently that *Nostra Aetate* is better understood as a document about the Catholic Church than about other religions. Promulgated near the close of Vatican II, *Nostra Aetate*’s most important value is what its assertions mean about the Body of Christ, rather than about those who are not Christian. This does not mean that the Declaration is not a positive asset for interreligious relations. In fact, it is the ecclesiology of *Nostra Aetate* that can serve as a foundation for a more productive phase of interreligious dialogue and comparative theology in the twenty-first century.

### 1. *Nostra Aetate Assessed within the Turn to the Subject in the Theology of Religions*

The disillusionment of theologians such as Jacques Dupuis is compounded when scholars recognize that *Nostra Aetate*’s relationship to the contemporary theology of religions is not simply privative. Theological shifts in the decades since 1965 have made the very foundations undergirding *Nostra Aetate* questionable for many interpreters. Modernistic assumptions positing an experiential core underlying the diversity of religions have faced criticism for the past quarter-century in the wake of philosophical and religious turns to the inescapable linguistic constructions of religion. Post-conciliar theologies such as Karl Rahner’s, which built upon *Nostra Aetate*’s confident teleological claim that God is the final goal of humanity to develop the category of “anonymous Christianity,” have been characterized as epicyclic continuations of Christian theological exclusivism in disguise.<sup>7</sup> Even theologians who have tried to construct pluralistic theologies of religion based on the foundations of reality or of justice have been criticized for assuming an implicit theism in Eastern traditions.<sup>8</sup> Appeals to implicit and anonymous Christianity, along with a hoped-for yet deferred eschatological reconciliation among people, may serve to keep an uneasy peace between adherents of different religions, but left to themselves these positions do little to foster interreligious dialogue.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> For the text of *Dominus Iesus*, see [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc\\_con\\_cfaith\\_doc\\_20000806\\_dominus-iesus\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20000806_dominus-iesus_en.html).

<sup>5</sup> For the text of the Joint Declaration, see [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/pontifical\\_councils/chrstuni/documents/rc\\_pc\\_chrstuni\\_doc\\_31101999\\_cath-luth-joint-declaration\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/documents/rc_pc_chrstuni_doc_31101999_cath-luth-joint-declaration_en.html).

<sup>6</sup> Jacques Dupuis, *Christianity and the Religions: From Confrontation to Dialogue*, trans. Phillip Berryman (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2002), 66.

<sup>7</sup> This is John Hick’s criticism of Karl Rahner’s concept of “anonymous Christianity.” See Hick, *The Second Christianity*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (1983; repr., Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2009), 76–82.

<sup>8</sup> For a criticism of Hick on this point, see Christoph Schwöbel, “Particularity, Universality, and the Religions: Toward a Christian Theology of Religions,” in *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered: The Myth of a Pluralistic Theology of Religions*, ed. Gavin D’Costa (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1990), 31–32.

<sup>9</sup> Here one has to distinguish between the hope for universal salvation on one hand, for example, and interreligious dialogue or comparative theology on the other. Promotion of the former position does not necessitate an enthusiastic

Consider Grant Kaplan's assertion that "An emphasis on the common nature of all human beings lies at the heart of the Council's spirit."<sup>10</sup> For Kaplan, the rhetorical questions that *Nostra Aetate* poses in paragraph one lay the groundwork for a functional definition of religion that moves beyond *a priori* deduction. At first glance the Declaration's opening interrogations do indeed seem helpful in identifying what *Nostra Aetate* describes as "things that human beings have in common and what things tend to bring them together." In a pioneering language event unprecedented in conciliar history the first paragraph of *Nostra Aetate* asks, "What is a human being? What is the meaning and purpose of our life? What is good and what is sin? What origin and purpose do sufferings have? What is the way to attaining true happiness? What are death, judgment and retribution after death? Lastly, what is that final unutterable mystery which takes in our lives and from which we take our origin and towards which we tend?" Yet the existential language of *Nostra Aetate* is laden with implicit particularisms that cannot be unequivocally affirmed in the Eastern spiritual traditions covered in the Declaration's very next paragraph. For example, not all religions describe evil as "sin" (*peccatum*). The notion of "retribution after death" (*retributio post mortem*) has similar restrictions in applicability. At these points the Declaration betrays its origin as the original chapter four of the Decree on Ecumenism, a decree that could understandably assume more common ground between the Catholic Church and religious others. What we have to work with in conciliar interpretation is a text that does not sufficiently appreciate the wisdom in those worldviews that, as Raimon Panikkar noted, "do not require the *reductio ad unam* that a certain monotheism considers necessary to reach rational intelligibility."<sup>11</sup>

The comparative study of mysticism, which has provided a major impetus to Christian theologies of religion in the last two centuries, has moved away from essentialist foundations towards contextualist frames of reference. Based upon readings of classic texts, Steven Katz and other scholars of mysticism have convincingly demonstrated that concepts and symbols inevitably shape interpreters' descriptions and understandings of the "final unutterable mystery" to which *Nostra Aetate* appeals.<sup>12</sup> Such is the inescapable burden of human subjectivity. At the ecclesial level, contextualist outworkings of subjectivity are embodied in creeds, ethical and liturgical practices, and the nexuses of relationships that constitute the church. Does this mean that *Nostra Aetate* should be interpreted as an ecclesiocentric text? Most definitely. Indeed the turn to the subject and the turn to language, which as Don Cupitt held "goes all the way down," casts doubt on the Whiggish paradigm of some Christian theologies of religion, in which ecclesiocentrism is superseded by an encompassing turn to Christocentrism, which in turn is engulfed within theocentrism until such time as regnocentrism is brought forth to provide the coup de grace to the last vestiges of theistic universalizing presumptions.<sup>13</sup> While Vatican II demonstrates that the church is a dynamic People of God that can read the signs of the times, as long as Roman Catholics organize themselves into communities called

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embrace of the latter. For a theological example, see Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Dare We Hope "That All Men Be Saved"?* *With a Short Discourse on Hell*, trans. David Kipp and Lothar Krauth (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1988). Balthasar proffers hope for the eventual salvation of all human beings as individuals, but holds to a sharp neo-orthodox distinction between Christianity and other religions.

<sup>10</sup> Grant Kaplan, "Getting History into Religion? Appropriating *Nostra Aetate* for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century," *Heythrop Journal* 52 (2011): 802–21, at 806.

<sup>11</sup> Raimon Panikkar, *The Rhythm of Being* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2010), 65.

<sup>12</sup> For Katz's programmatic and influential essay on this point, see Steven T. Katz, "Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism," in *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis*, ed. Steven T. Katz (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978).

<sup>13</sup> For Katz's programmatic and influential essay on this point, see Steven T. Katz, "Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism," in *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis*, ed. Steven T. Katz (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978).

Church, ecclesiocentricity cannot be dispensed with at the epistemological and philosophical levels, even if it is superseded in broader understandings of revelation and soteriology that see divine initiative at work outside visible religious institutions. This recognition that ecclesiality too, like language, goes “all the way down” can lead to theological exclusivism in the face of religious diversity, but it could also serve to provide a more informed communal consciousness that might enable Roman Catholicism to promote more constructive interreligious dialogues.

## 2. *Turning the Lens of Nostra Aetate 2 from Non-Christians to the Catholic Church*

If theological exclusivism—the claim that salvation and grace are only found within the visible church—is rejected by Vatican II’s positions in *Lumen Gentium* and *Nostra Aetate*, should one abandon the christocentric inclusivism of *Nostra Aetate* to pursue a pluralist theology of religions?<sup>14</sup> This option has been promoted by some of the most influential scholars in the theology of religions over the past few decades.<sup>15</sup> I suggest instead that paragraph two of *Nostra Aetate* offers us an innovative way to understand Catholic ecclesiology as a mutual-mediating dialectic. In other words, let us address the question of what the Declaration’s terse and general assertions about Hinduism and Buddhism tell us . . . not so much about Hinduism and Buddhism but about the Church.

### a. *Hinduism*

In non-committal language alluding to Hindu vocations of *jnana-marga* and *bhakti-marga*, we read that Hinduism explores divine mystery with (1) a “wealth of myths” and (2) “philosophical investigations,” while on the practical level it seeks liberation through (3) “ascetical life or deep meditation” or (4) “taking refuge in God.” That’s all. A Christian fulfillment theory of religions might hold that these are positive characteristics only until such time as the Christian gospel supersedes them via missionary conversion. Such a reading could draw support from paragraph two’s condescending contrast between the “deep religious sense (*intimo sensu religioso*)” of various apparently primitive peoples, and the “more refined ideas (*subtilioribus notionibus*)” of religions connected to the “progress of culture (*progressu culturae*).” Yet if we do not pursue the fulfillment theory, another ecclesial path can be taken. If these characteristics that are part of what *Nostra Aetate* calls “those things which are true and holy” endure even after the encounter between Christianity and Hinduism, then what would it mean for members of the Catholic Church to exist in a community that tried to respond to the divine mystery by living in accord with the four characteristics above? What if Catholics were to understand these characteristics not simply as Hindu, but as potential ways in which Roman Catholicism itself could be transformed in response to its meeting with Hindu spiritualities?<sup>16</sup>

First, Catholic Christians should listen attentively to Raimon Panikkar’s call for remythification in the modern age as a helpful example of what *Nostra Aetate* calls “the inexhaustible

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<sup>14</sup> For *Lumen Gentium*’s affirmation of the scope of salvation outside the visible Catholic Church, see chapter 2 of that document.

<sup>15</sup> A representative lineup of these theologians may be found in the collection *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness: Toward a Pluralist Theology of Religions*, ed. John Hick and Paul F. Knitter (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1987).

<sup>16</sup> For an explanation of how religious traditions can be understood as dynamic carriers of meaning that are transformed in response to their environments, rather than as reified and static promoters of doctrine and institutional authority, see Francis Clooney, “When the Religions become Context,” *Theology Today* 47/1 (April 1990): 30–38.

wealth of myths.”<sup>17</sup> As an example of what needs reconsideration, consider the Christian apologetic contrast between myth and history, typified in Dorothy Sayers’s mid-century claim that for centuries Christianity “had toiled . . . to drag the dark images of fable and fancy into the daylight of history and reason.”<sup>18</sup> An implied contrast between myth and history appears in Vatican II’s Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation. Here in paragraph two of *Dei Verbum*, the concept of “the history of salvation” serves as a framework within which the deeds and words of revelation achieve an “inner unity,” an implicit rebuke to the crypto-theological positivism that was a hallmark of previous Catholic manual theology. Salvation history, however, has shortcomings as a model for divine revelation; as Avery Dulles pointed out, “much of the biblical material pertaining to God’s actions can be called history only in a very extended sense.”<sup>19</sup> While chapter three of *Dei Verbum* gave a massive boost to Catholic historical scholarship, that document also noted that the historical genre is only one of several genres found in the Christian Bible. Chapter five of this same Dogmatic Constitution “unhesitatingly asserts” the “historical character” of the New Testament gospels, thus reassuring readers that Jesus can be placed on the historical side of the myth-history distinction. This division of myth and history continues in the 1992 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, in which paragraph 285 references myths of origin that compete with a Christian understanding of creation, but paragraph 498 reassures readers who might have been unsettled by Raymond Brown’s publications that the virgin birth of Jesus “could hardly have been motivated by pagan mythology.”<sup>20</sup> The tension between myth and history reaches a crescendo in paragraph 390 on original sin, in which the *Catechism* states: “The account of the fall in *Genesis 3* uses figurative language, but affirms a primeval event, a deed that took place *at the beginning of the history of man.*”<sup>21</sup> We have here an appeal to a new category, “figurative history,” which some would call . . . myth.

In the course of his long intellectual and spiritual career the Spanish-Indian theologian Raimon Panikkar (1918–2010) stressed the need to embrace myth rather than to flee it as an obsolete stage of civilizational development. Panikkar, however, was far from a reactionary seeking refuge in archaic tales. He held that modern peoples need a new myth, a larger horizon in which the testimonies gathered through interreligious dialogue are amenable to a synthesis whose contents cannot be predicted in advance.<sup>22</sup> To apply Panikkar’s prescription to this current examination of *Nostra Aetate* we can ask, what would it mean for the Roman Catholic Church to pursue Panikkar’s recommendation to dispense with the ascription of history to Christianity and myth to the non-Christian religious others? Is it possible to pursue Panikkar’s goal of a mythic communion in which the definition of the Church is mutable in constant response to ongoing dialogue?<sup>23</sup> In other words, is it possible to maintain an open-ended version of ecclesiocentricity, one dialogically molded by the Catholic Church’s encounters with other people? Conservatives will counter that such a view undermines the uniqueness of Christ, while liberals might bypass the ecclesial possibilities of Panikkar’s dialogical opening in a rush to trade in an ecclesial framework for a christocentric or

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<sup>17</sup> See Raimon Panikkar, *Myth, Faith, and Hermeneutics: Cross-Cultural Studies* (New York: Paulist, 1979).

<sup>18</sup> Dorothy Sayers, introduction to *Purgatorio* (New York: Penguin, 1955), 39.

<sup>19</sup> Avery Dulles, *Models of Revelation*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1992), 63.

<sup>20</sup> See Raymond E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah: A Commentary on the Infancy Narratives in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., The Anchor Yale Bible Reference Library (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999).

<sup>21</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church* [#390], 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Washington, DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1997), 98. Emphasis in original.

<sup>22</sup> See Panikkar, *Myth, Faith, and Hermeneutics*, 244.

<sup>23</sup> For Panikkar’s description of “mythic communion,” see *Myth, Faith, and Hermeneutics*, 237–48; also, Christopher Denny, “Interreligious Reading and Self-Definition for Raimon Panikkar and Francis Clooney,” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 44/3 (Summer 2009): 409–31.

theocentric one, thereby abandoning the field to a truncated and unchallenged institutional ecclesiology. Perhaps both liberals and conservatives could be mollified on this point, since Panikkar’s ultimate appeal to mythic communion is trinitarian, a stance that is congenial to recent communion ecclesiologies.<sup>24</sup> For example, in his 1973 book *The Trinity and the Religious Experience of Man*, Panikkar held that the Trinity shows forth *advaitic* love, in which the Spirit is the nonduality of Father and Son. *Advaita* rescues the Trinity from a conception of personhood that is individualist and that raises the specter of tritheism when pursued in a certain direction.<sup>25</sup> Advaitic love, however, is not a historical artifact, but is instead a myth. To call this love a myth is not to denigrate it as false in the way that the popular understanding of myth uses that word as a synonym for something that is not true. Rather, advaitic love is a horizon in which the world, the self, and God are posited as overlapping yet irreducible facets of a single all-encompassing reality.<sup>26</sup>

When applied at an ecclesial level, the myth of advaitic love adds a cosmological depth to Vatican II’s Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes*. If the Catholic Church as a whole committed itself to a loving relationship with God and the world in which other spiritual people were not simply placed under the category of “non-Christians,” the possibility emerges of a model for interreligious dialogue that is ecclesiocentric without being exclusivist or revanchist. Note that this hypothetical conversion to mythic communion would be one *internal* to the Catholic Church, rather than a putatively neutral common ground among religions or an agreed-upon plan of action among different religious groups. The Catholic Church would not need to wait for other religious actors to accept Jesus Christ as the world’s savior in order to enter into this advaitic love. What are the possible consequences of such a collective transformation? Consider how a mythical frame of reference could recast debates over church authority in a new light. At a time when many Catholic debates about church reform, hierarchy, gender, and ordination center upon historical claims about the origin of the church and church structure, a Catholic remythicization undertaken in response to what some experience as divine mystery could mean that past ecclesial practices need no longer be completely determinative for Catholic ecclesiology. Rather than seeing such structural changes as a deplorable “selling out” to a modern world marked by secularization and democratic tendencies, Catholics can appeal to what *Nostra Aetate* itself says about Hinduism in reflecting how they might partake of that same response to ultimate reality. This possible Catholic remythicization does not mean rejecting history, the historicity of Jesus, or the reliability of the apostolic witness. What is instead needed is a recognition that the deductive application of history to present day religious circumstances has limits insofar as each generation of Christians confronts the challenge of distinguishing what is normative for Christian life and practice, in which subjective commitments and values inevitably enter into the process of discernment.

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<sup>24</sup> See Dennis M. Doyle, *Communion Ecclesiology: Vision and Versions* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2000).

<sup>25</sup> For an exposition of the tendencies toward tritheism, with attention to the socio-political implications of trinitarian doctrine, see Leonardo Boff, *Trinity and Society*, trans. Paul Burns (1988; repr., Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2005), 77–96. For an explanation of Panikkar’s advaitic understanding of the Trinity in an interreligious context, see Raimon Panikkar, *The Trinity and the Religious Experience of Man: Icon—Person—Mystery* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1973); Christopher Denny, “Trinitarian Theology between Religious Walls in the Writings of Raimon Panikkar,” *Open Theology* 2 (2016): 363–73.

<sup>26</sup> For the distinction between advaita and monism, with which advaita is often confused, see Panikkar, *Rhythm of Being*, 212–32.

*b. Buddhism*

Moving from Hinduism to Buddhism, *Nostra Aetate 2* singles out two elements: (1) Buddhism's acknowledgement of "the radical inadequacy of this changeable world" and (2) the promulgation of a way to attain "perfect freedom" or "the highest illumination." While Panikkar appeals to myth to foster interreligious dialogue, Robert Magliola counters fulfillment theologies of religion by insisting that Christians must learn from what makes them uncomfortable.<sup>27</sup> With its denial of ontological substantiality and essentiality, Myadhamika Buddhism serves as such an interreligious gadfly in Magliola's judgment. To see how acceptance of "radical inadequacy" and change can foster an ecclesiological transformation consider Vatican II's document *Lumen Gentium*. Paragraph 16 of this Dogmatic Constitution on the Church arranges non-Christians along a spectrum, with those who acknowledge God such as Jews and Muslims at one end, and those who do not acknowledge God at the other. In this way, the Second Vatican Council exemplified an approach to interreligious dialogue in which God serves as a stable organizing criterion.

But what if the human encounter with God is inevitably an apophatic experience, in which the infinite divine mystery transcends the formal boundaries of both the intellect and religious communities? The Christian commitment to one God in distinct three divine persons already points to a paradoxical embrace of apophaticism. Much as Panikkar appeals to an advaitic understanding of Trinity to destabilize egoistic identity, Magliola proffers a Buddhist-inflected theory of dependent co-origination to assert that the Holy Spirit is, as the oppositional relationship between Father and Son, an indicator that a type of Derridean difference exists within the Trinity. This difference complicates attempts to claim that the Christian God is simply a *sumum bonum* or the archetype of ontological perfection; to the extent that trinitarian difference eludes personalist understandings of God derived from human personhood, a theology of God must also make room for an impersonal approach according to both Panikkar and Magliola.

This Trinitarian theology might sound remote from the exigencies of interreligious dialogue. Since Vatican II orients its arrangement of non-Christians around the topic of ultimate reality and God, however, Magliola's deconstructionist philosophy raises questions about the adequacy of these theological characterizations of religious diversity, which seen in this light are perhaps examples of the "radical inadequacy" of the world referenced in *Nostra Aetate 2*. Reading this paragraph of the Declaration with an acknowledgement of the inevitable ecclesial subjectivity involved in interreligious dialogue can paradoxically undermine the idea that the Catholic Church is an Archimedian fulcrum that remains stable while the religious others orbit around it. Again, the new ecclesial understanding that can result is not an entryway into a perennial philosophy of religion or experiential core that underlies all religion. Nor is it the fruit of a bilateral dialogue between Christianity and Buddhism, though it can be considered a prerequisite to such a dialogue, one that the Catholic Church must take upon itself to fulfill.

John Dadosky has written of the strengths and the limitations of Vatican II's portrait of the church:

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<sup>27</sup> See Robert Magliola, *On Deconstructing Life-Worlds: Buddhism, Christianity, Culture*, vol. 3, American Academy of Religion Cultural Criticism Series (Atlanta: Scholars, 1997), 182.

In terms of Vatican II ecclesiology, communion ecclesiology is primarily a *self-mediating* understanding of the Church in the sense that she becomes more herself insofar as she realizes the visible and invisible communion of the People of God as the mystical body of Christ (*Ecclesia ad intra*). This ecclesiology is represented by the document *Lumen Gentium*. By ‘self-mediating’ I mean that the Church, so to speak, becomes more herself in functioning according to what is envisaged by *communion ecclesiology*. However, I believe the limitation of such a vision is that it does *not* envisage that the Church can also become more herself by receiving from the Other (i.e., through mutually self-mediating relations).<sup>28</sup>

Mutually self-mediating relations can only be established where the boundaries between self and other are fluid and changeable. Dadosky notes, “The authentic self is never a self-possessed ‘self’ but one that is beholden to the other. Consequently, the Church’s self is constituted in relation not only to God, but also as this affects its relationship to other Christian traditions, religions, cultures, including secular culture.”<sup>29</sup> *Nostra Aetate*’s seemingly innocuous comments about Hinduism and Buddhism, when interpreted in a dialogical manner, can move the vision of *Lumen Gentium* to a more mutually-mediating ecclesiology.

### Conclusion

The common thread in applying these Hindu and Buddhist lenses to *Nostra Aetate* is that they provide a critical look at, and a constructive opportunity to reassess, the Church’s construction of salvation history. In the first century the earliest Christians had to rethink their relationship to Judaism, as the Catholic Church did in the twentieth century after the Shoah with *Nostra Aetate* and the establishment of the Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews. In the twenty-first century, the Catholic Church must commit itself over the long term to forging a shared understanding of salvation history (or a “myth of salvation”) with Hindus and Buddhists. This will be a complicated task since, unlike Judaism, such a salvation history cannot presume theism as a reference point. Moreover, as Panikkar pointed out, many Hindus do not understand the very category of history in the same manner as theologians, scholars, and parishioners in Western Christianity. Indeed, Panikkar used the phrase the “myth of history” to relativize historicist understandings of scriptures, traditions, and scholarship.<sup>30</sup> Additionally, Buddhist-Christian comparisons brought to light by Magliola remind us that all understandings of history are effervescent and many do not consider that time’s flow is subject to ontological restrictions. But Wilfred Cantwell Smith’s claim that “All human history is *Heilsgeschichte*” provides a starting point for understanding the task at hand.<sup>31</sup> Given the non-dualist and apophatic parameters I have set forth in this essay, it would be a contradiction for me to claim that an expanded understanding of the myth of salvation “history” could ever be complete. The claim to a complete understanding of history exemplified in Hegel’s *Lectures on the Philosophy of History* or in orientalist appropriations of Eastern traditions are relics of past eras. To avoid hubris and misunderstanding, a shared Buddhist-

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<sup>28</sup> John D. Dadosky, “Towards a Fundamental Theological *Re*-Interpretation of Vatican II,” *Heythrop Journal* 49 (2008): 742–63, at 746. Emphases in original.

<sup>29</sup> John D. Dadosky, “Methodological Presuppositions for Engaging the Other in the Post-Vatican II Context: Insights from Ignatius and Lonergan,” *Journal of Inter-Religious Dialogue* (March 2010): 9–24, at 11n4.

<sup>30</sup> See Panikkar, *Myth, Faith, and Hermeneutics*, 98–101.

<sup>31</sup> Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Towards a World Theology: Faith and the Comparative History of Religion* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1989), 172.



Hindu-Christian vision of salvation history will need continuous revision in response to new experiences of what the underrated second paragraph of *Nostra Aetate* calls the “ray of that truth which enlightens everyone.”

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