

The Catholic Church and the Non-Christian World: Teaching *Lumen Gentium* §16 and *Nostra Aetate*¹

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*There is widespread ignorance among Catholics that the Church formally teaches that it is possible for non-Christians to be saved, and that it encourages interreligious dialogue. Effective teaching methods must be developed to address the issue of the Church and the non-Christian world. Simply focusing on *Lumen Gentium* §16 and *Nostra Aetate* is not enough; considerable background information on these documents must be given. If not, these documents can appear to conservatives as capitulations to contemporary trends and to liberals as disingenuous departures from the Church’s historical stances. This paper offers background information upon which the educator may draw. It also explores issues of pedagogy and student reactions.*

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I have encountered, in both parishes and Catholic classrooms, and in broader social settings, a widespread ignorance that the Catholic Church today teaches that non-Christians can be saved, and that it currently encourages rapport and dialogue between religions. I have heard other professors of Catholic theology, from various parts of the country, state the same. In fact, a professor at a major Catholic institution commented, in a public talk, that incoming graduate students in theology are ignorant of these facts. This widespread ignorance is somewhat surprising. For instance, in the nineteenth century, Pius IX and Vatican I taught that non-Christians can be saved. Later, in 1949, Fr. Leonard Feeney was excommunicated over this issue. More recently, Popes Paul VI, John Paul II, Benedict XVI, and Francis have all promoted interreligious dialogue through their writings and highly visible public actions.

Given this widespread ignorance, it is essential to develop and circulate effective ways of teaching *Lumen Gentium* §16 and *Nostra Aetate*.² This paper sets forth some methods for doing so. It has its genesis in talks that I have given in parishes and years of teaching

¹The author thanks the many people who offered feedback, including the two anonymous reviewers. He also thanks Matthew Kuettel, who served as a research assistant and offered insightful comments.

²For recent studies of Vatican II’s teachings on the non-Christian world, see Gerald O’Collins, *The Second Vatican Council on Other Religions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); and Gavin D’Costa, *Vatican II: Catholic Doctrines on Jews and Muslims* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014). The analyses of O’Collins and D’Costa are at odds, the former emphasizing discontinuity between the teachings of the Council and past teaching, and the latter emphasizing continuity. Other important, related works are Charles L. Cohen, Paul F. Knitter, and Ulrich Rosenhagen, eds., *The Future of Interreligious Dialogue: A Multi-religious Conversation on *Nostra Aetate** (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2017); Pim Valkenberg and Anthony Cirelli, eds., *Nostra Aetate: Celebrating Fifty Years of the Catholic Church’s Dialogue with Jews and Muslims* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2016); and Gilbert S. Rosenthal, ed., *A Jubilee for All Time: The Copernican Revolution in Jewish-Christian Relations* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2014).

about these topics in the university setting. A further goal of the paper is to promote research and reflection on *Lumen Gentium* §16 and *Nostra Aetate*. In Catholic schools in America there often are students from a variety of backgrounds as relates to religious belief. Hence, various issues come up in teaching, and those issues lead to further reflection on these documents.

My goal in teaching these documents is to cultivate respect among my students for those of religious backgrounds different from their own. It is arguable that classic beliefs about the salvation of non-Christians do not necessitate disrespectful attitudes towards them as human beings. As Pope Pius IX stated in his 1863 encyclical, *Quanto Conficiamur Moerore*, “God forbid that the children of the Catholic Church should even in any way be unfriendly to those who are not at all united to us.”³ However, the very fact that the Pope found it necessary to “forbid . . . unfriendly” behavior shows that classic teaching on the salvation of non-Christians has fostered negative behavior. Indeed, various scholars have explored how aspects of traditional Christian doctrine have played a role in the oppression of various non-Christian peoples. For instance, there is Rosemary Ruether’s classic work *Faith and Fratricide*, and more recent explorations by scholars such as Jeannine Fletcher and Kimberly Vrudny.⁴

The method and approach outlined in this paper were developed at a liberal arts school with an undergraduate student population of around six thousand. Students come from a broad range of backgrounds, but many come from upper-middle-class homes in the suburbs. The most popular major is business. Forty-one percent of the student population is Catholic, and twenty-five percent are Protestant. The remainder adhere to a variety of beliefs, including atheism and non-Christian religions.

The paper consists of six main parts. The first part discusses the development of the doctrine of *extra ecclesiam nulla salus*, “no salvation outside the Church,” and introduces the rise of anti-Judaism in Christianity. The second part shows the development, covering a millennium, of the ideas that emerged in *Lumen Gentium* §16 about the salvation of non-Christians. This section is mainly a distillation of Francis Sullivan’s study, *Salvation Outside the Church*. It is a distillation conducted with a view towards examples that capture student attention and render explicable the progression in thought.⁵ In some cases, strategies are given for teaching these examples.

The third part shows the development of *Nostra Aetate* and how it addresses anti-Judaism. The fourth discusses how *Nostra Aetate* addresses other non-Christian religions, showing the comparisons made and giving an approach that has worked well in talks and lectures. The fifth section addresses student questions and reactions. The final, concluding

³Pius IX, *Quanto Conficiamur Moerore* §7, in Catholic Church, Claudia Carlen, trans., *The Papal Encyclicals*, 5 vols. (McGrath Publishing Company, 1981), 1:371.

⁴Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Faith and Fratricide: The Theological Roots of Anti-Semitism* (New York: Seabury Press, 1974). Jeannine Hill Fletcher, *The Sin of White Supremacy: Christianity, Racism, and Religious Diversity in America* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2017). Kimberly Vrudny, *Beauty's Vineyard: A Theological Aesthetic of Anguish and Anticipation* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2016), 66–67, 70.

⁵Francis A. Sullivan, *Salvation Outside the Church?: Tracing the History of the Catholic Response* (New York: Paulist Press, 1992).

section points out further directions beyond the more fundamental material covered herein.

Extra Ecclesiam Nulla Salus and Anti-Judaism

For students to grasp *Lumen Gentium* §16 and *Nostra Aetate*, considerable historical and biblical context needs to be given. Without context, these documents seem unrealistic to the students.⁶ The reason is that students know that the Church has not always been positive in its stance towards the non-Christian world. Hence, these documents can appear to the students as blips on a screen, and as whimsical capitulations to modern trends. However, by addressing the issue of *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* a link can be made between what the students expect and what the magisterium currently teaches. The negative history has to be confronted for the Vatican II documents to appear credible.

The doctrine, *extra ecclesiam*, belongs to the domain of ecclesiology. Hence, to properly understand this doctrine it is essential to examine the foundational, scriptural notions of the Church. In several places in his letters, St. Paul made it clear that the baptized believers together make up the “body of Christ” (1 Cor 12:27).⁷ The early Christians were faced with the serious dilemma that Christ, whom they believed to be the savior, had left earth. How, then, does one continue to relate to him? St. Paul’s answer was that Christ continues to be present through the community of baptized believers: the Church (Rom 12:5; 1 Cor 12:12; Eph 1:20–23, 2:19–22, 4:4–13).

Since Christ was believed to be present through the Church, unity became a major concern. In the letters of St. Paul one can see this concern, as he worked to heal a variety of splits in the communities he had founded. Later, in the third century, the importance of unity was articulated in doctrinal terms. One of the most striking expressions of the importance of unity appeared in Cyprian of Carthage’s *The Unity of the Catholic Church*: “Whoever is separated from the Church and is joined to an adulteress, is separated from the promises of the Church; nor can he who forsakes the Church of Christ attain to the rewards of Christ. He is a stranger; he is profane; he is an enemy. He can no longer have God for his Father, who has not the Church for his mother.”⁸

This statement was one of the earliest articulations of the idea, *extra ecclesiam nulla salus*. It tends to shock students. They realize that relations between the Church and other religions have not been positive, but they are not expecting a statement that bold. However, this early expression in Cyprian’s work was not yet the classic teaching of *extra ecclesiam*, for

⁶Indeed, at a 2012 conference, “Vatican II: Teaching and Understanding the Council after 50 Years,” held at the University of St. Thomas, attendees commented that much context has to be given for students to grasp the significance of the Vatican II documents.

⁷All biblical quotations contained in this article are from the New Revised Standard Version Bible, as found in *The New Oxford Annotated Bible with the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books*, ed. Bruce M. Metzger and Roland E. Murphy (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

⁸Cyprian of Carthage, *On the Unity of the Church* §6, in Ernest Wallis, trans., Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Cox, eds., *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers Down to A.D. 325*, 10 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1981) 5:421. (This can be found at “On the Unity of the Church,” New Advent, <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/050701.htm>.) For a discussion of Cyprian see Sullivan, *Salvation Outside*, 20–24. See also, Jacques Dupuis, *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001), 87–89.

Cyprian was not addressing non-Christians in this statement. Rather, he was warning other Christians not to splinter and form a separate group; he was warning them to stay together. There was much disunity in the early Church, for the Christians did not yet have the basic creeds and doctrines on which mainstream Christians of later centuries would all rely. Further, the persecutions by the Romans put severe pressure on Christian communities, and that led to splintering. My students grasp this issue and thereby become sympathetic to Cyprian.

In the following century, John Chrysostom gave a different version of this teaching. Whereas Cyprian was warning the Christian not to splinter, Chrysostom was warning the non-Christian to join the Church:

Do not say: “How is it that God has neglected that sincere and honest pagan?” You will find that such a one [a pagan] has not really been diligent in seeking the truth, since what concerns the truth is now clearer than the sun. How shall they obtain pardon who, when they see the doctrine of truth spread before them, make no effort to come to know it? For now the name of God is proclaimed to all, what the prophets predicted has come true, and the religion of the pagans has been proved false.⁹

Chrysostom’s declaration can cause outrage among my students, including those with strong, clear Christian commitments. Given today’s pluralistic context it is hard for them to imagine how anyone could assert that it should be evident to all that a particular religion is necessarily the right way. How could Chrysostom be so confident that the truth of Christianity should be clear to all?

There are several reasons that Chrysostom felt this way. First, by the time he made his pronouncement, Christianity had not only been legalized but had become the official religion of the Roman Empire. Because Christianity had thus spread throughout the Empire, Chrysostom believed that no one had an excuse for not considering Christianity, and that if they did consider it they would find it to be true. A further point is that Mediterranean peoples of late antiquity saw the hand of the divine in world events. Hence, if Christianity had triumphed over the pagan religions it must have been because God had made it triumph. Lastly, the people of late antiquity had great respect for prophecies and oracles. The early Christians would sometimes share biblical prophecies with non-Christians and argue that Christ fulfilled those writings. That was considered solid proof.¹⁰

⁹This is Dupuis’s translation and adaptation taken from Dupuis, *Toward a Christian Theology*, 89. For the full text see John Chrysostom, “Homily 26 on the *Epistle to the Romans*,” J. Walker, J. Sheppard, and H. Browne, trans., Philip Schaff, ed., *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers (1st series)* 14 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1979), 11: 532. (This can also be found at “Homily 26 on *Romans*,” New Advent, <http://newadvent.org/fathers/210226.htm>.) For discussions of this material see the above citation to Dupuis, and also Sullivan, *Salvation Outside*, 24–27.

¹⁰Students grasp that from Chrysostom’s vantage point it was reasonable to declare that it should be clear to all that Christianity is the ultimate truth. However, some students might point out that historical circumstances change, and they might ask if conclusions that seemed reasonable in one social and political context might not seem so in another. Thus, some interesting discussions can follow.

Another aspect of Chrysostom’s thought was his anti-Judaism. Chrysostom’s warning that there is no salvation outside the Church was addressed to the non-Christian world in general. However, he had particularly dire things to say about the Jews. According to him, the Jewish people had been prepared for centuries by the Law and the prophets to accept Christ. However, when Christ came they rejected him. On the other hand, the Gentiles, who had not been prepared by the Law and the prophets, accepted Jesus in mass numbers. Thus, Chrysostom concluded, the Jews must be a wretched people: “When so many blessings from heaven came into their hands, they thrust them aside and were at great pains to reject them. The morning Sun of Justice arose for them, but they thrust aside its rays and still sit in darkness. We, who were nurtured by darkness, drew the light to ourselves and were freed from the gloom of their error.”¹¹ Further, he concluded that since the Jews do not accept Christ, and since Christ is God, then Jews do not worship God but the devil. Furthermore, he leveled against them a charge that became classic, the accusation of “deicide.” This is the idea that the Jewish people, collectively, bear the guilt for the death of Jesus, and thus are “god-killers.”¹²

The teaching, *extra ecclesiam*, and anti-Judaism, did not remain the teachings of individual theologians. Rather, they became widely accepted. For instance, in the thirteenth century *extra ecclesiam* began appearing in the teachings of popes and councils.¹³ Conciliar evidence of contempt for Jews lies in the disciplinary decrees of the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215. The Council mandated that Jews and Muslims distinguish themselves in dress from Christians and forbade them from appearing in public during Passion Sunday and the final three days of Holy Week.¹⁴ Further, Jews were not allowed to hold public office, “since it is absurd that a blasphemer of Christ exercise authority over Christians.”¹⁵ Anti-Judaism was by no means confined to the Catholic and Orthodox traditions. In this regard, one can examine Martin Luther’s *Concerning the Jews and Their Lies*.¹⁶

¹¹John Chrysostom, *Discourses Against Judaizing Christians* §1.2.1, in Paul W. Harkins, trans., Hermigild Dressler, ed., *The Fathers of the Church: A New Translation*, 128 vols. (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1979), 68:5. (This can be found online at Roger Pearse, ed., “Early Church Fathers – Additional Texts,” The Tertullian Project, <http://www.tertullian.org/fathers/>.) For a brief historical account of anti-Judaism in Christianity see Mary Christine Athans, “Antisemitism? Or Anti-Judaism?,” in *Introduction to Jewish-Christian Relations*, ed. Michael Shermis and Arthur E. Zannoni (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 1991), 118–144.

¹²Chrysostom, *Discourses* §1.3.2, 1.6.7, 4.3.6, in Harkins, *Fathers of the Church*, 68: 11, 24, 78–79.

¹³Dupuis, *Toward a Christian Theology*, 93–96. The classic formulation of *extra ecclesiam* by the Council of Florence can be found at: Sullivan, *Salvation Outside*, 66; Dupuis, *Toward a Christian*, 95–96; Josef Neuner and Jacques Dupuis, eds., *The Christian Faith in the Doctrinal Documents of the Catholic Church* (Staten Island, NY: Alba House, 1990), 305. (This can also be found at “Bull of union with the Copts,” Eternal Word Television Network, <https://www.ewtn.com/library/COUNCILS/FLORENCE.HTM#5>.)

¹⁴Fourth Lateran Council, *Disciplinary Decrees* §68, in Catholic Church, Henry Joseph Schroeder, ed., *Disciplinary Decrees of the General Councils, Text, Translation, and Commentary* (St. Louis, MO: B. Herder Book Co, 1937), 290. (This can also be found at “Medieval Sourcebook: Twelfth Ecumenical Council: Lateran IV 1215,” Fordham University, <http://legacy.fordham.edu/halsall/basis/lateran4.asp>.)

¹⁵Fourth Lateran Council, *Disciplinary Decrees* §69, in Schroeder, *Disciplinary Decrees*, 291.

¹⁶Luther, “Concerning the Jews and Their Lies” in *Disputation and Dialogue: Readings in the Jewish-Christian Encounter*, ed. Frank Ephraim Talmage (New York: Ktav Publishing House, 1975), 34–36. (Selections from this can also be found in Athans, “Antisemitism?,” in *Jewish-Christian Relations*, eds. Shermis and Zannoni, 125–26; and at “Anti-Semitism: Martin Luther – ‘The Jews & Their Lies,’” Jewish Virtual Library, http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/anti-semitism/Luther_on_Jews.html.)

Anti-Judaism is a sinister topic, but it is essential that it be covered. To begin, *Nostra Aetate* originated as an initiative to end it. Further, although students are aware that Christianity has a long history of negative relations with other religions, they are surprised and shocked to learn that this negative history includes Judaism.¹⁷ They are probably surprised by this because of the historical connections between the two religions, because they share some of the same foundations. Also, many students have a naïve, ahistorical approach to Christianity, believing that because Jesus taught a message of love, the history of the Church is a history of love.

When I shared this ignorance with a Jewish friend, she became alarmed, stating that when history is forgotten, history repeats itself. Also, at a time when both religious diversity and religious fundamentalism are on the rise, Christians need to be reminded of the dark side of exclusivist approaches. They need to be made aware of Chrysostom's *Against the Judaizers*, and the dark conclusion of devil worship that he drew from his rigid approach to John 14:6.¹⁸

The Salvation of Non-Christians

It was and is the teaching of the Catholic Church that the Church is necessary for salvation.¹⁹ However, there is a long history of considering exceptions to this idea. A good starting point for exploring this history is the thought of Thomas Aquinas. He considered the case of a catechumen whose life is cut short. This person was preparing to enter the Church but never had the chance. Is he or she condemned? Aquinas argued that this is not necessarily so: "Such a man can obtain salvation without being actually baptized, on account of his desire for Baptism, which desire is the outcome of *faith that worketh by charity*; whereby God, Whose power is not tied to visible sacraments, sanctifies man inwardly."²⁰

In other words, salvation normally becomes possible through the sacrament of baptism, a ritual involving water, oil, salt, and particular prayers. However, God does not require these things to act. If God wants to save someone he can do so, regardless of whether or not the proper ritual was performed. The catechumen was preparing to enter

¹⁷A student once said to me in conversation that she believed that relationships between the Church and Judaism were good up until Vatican II. With the dropping of many popular devotions, she said, the ritualistic links between the two religions were no longer clear, and hence a formerly good relationship was lost.

¹⁸Also, Pope Benedict had stated, "At the same time, remembrance of the past remains for both communities a moral imperative . . . Of its very nature this imperative must include a continued reflection on the profound historical, moral and theological questions presented by the experience of the Shoah," "Address of His Holiness Benedict XVI to a Delegation of the International Jewish Committee on Interreligious Consultations," Holy Office, http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2005/june/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20050609_jewish-committee.html (accessed February 18, 2016). Also, "the Church, embracing sinners in her bosom, is at the same time holy and always in need of being purified, and incessantly pursues the path of penance and renewal," Second Vatican Council, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (*Lumen Gentium*) §8, in Walter M. Abbott, ed., *The Documents of Vatican II* (New York: Guild Press, 1966), 24.

¹⁹Second Vatican Council, Constitution on the Church (*Lumen Gentium*) §14, in Abbott, *Documents*, 32.

²⁰Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* III Q. 68, art. 2, in Fathers of the English Dominican Province, trans., *The "Summa Theologica" of St. Thomas Aquinas*, 3 vols. (New York: Benzinger Brothers, 1947), 2:2399. (The italicized words indicate a scriptural quotation.)

the Church, and so God might save her by virtue of her desire to enter. Hence, the classic expression: “baptism of desire.”²¹

In the 1500s some theologians considered the question of whether someone who had never heard of Christ could be saved. Not having heard the Gospel, is it her fault that she has not entered the Church? This question was considered during the Age of Discovery because Western Europeans became aware of how vast the world is, and that only a small fraction of the world’s population, at that time, knew of Christianity.²² A key figure who considered the question was the Dominican, Domingo Soto.²³ He argued that if someone ignorant of the Gospel strives to follow the natural law, God might grant him or her an interior illumination. That illumination would grant an implicit faith in Christ, such that that person could be saved. The professor might have to explain the concept of natural law, and he can state that it is the idea that all peoples, simply through the use of reason, can arrive at a knowledge of what is objectively right and wrong, for instance, that it is wrong to lie and steal.²⁴

In the seventeenth century, the major theologian and papal advisor, Juan De Lugo, considered the case of those who know of Christ, but who do not accept him as the savior. More to the point, he considered the cases of the Jew and the Muslim. However, before explaining his ideas one might have to discuss Judaism and Islam with the students. My students express skepticism that Jews and Muslims of that era knew of Jesus. However, since most Jews were living in Christian lands, most, if not all of them, did know of Jesus.²⁵ Further, Islam and Christianity share similar notions of God, and many of the biblical characters appear in the Qur’an as well. Further, Muslims consider Jesus to have been a prophet, the greatest next to Muhammad, although not the savior and the Son of God.

De Lugo expressed hopefulness about the salvation of Jews and Muslims. He based his hopefulness on the connections that both Judaism and Islam have with Christianity. Specifically, Judaism and Christianity share much of the same divine revelation, the Bible. Further, in the estimation of many non-Muslims, the Qur’an was influenced by the Bible. Hence, De Lugo believed that the Koran has a genuine connection with divine revelation.

More to the point, De Lugo took an epistemological approach to the issue. Jews and Muslims know of Christ, but they might not have had enough exposure to the Gospel to make it compelling. In that case the person’s ignorance that Christ is the savior is “invincible,” or not able to be dispelled. Therefore, he is not “culpable” or guilty of not accepting Christ.²⁶ The professor can clarify these ideas in a creative fashion. Muslims believe that God is one and almighty, that nothing under the heavens compares to him in

²¹Sullivan, *Salvation Outside*, 58–60. Students who seek a connection to God without organized religion respond favorably to this idea, although the contemporary notion of approaching God without the Church would have been inconceivable to Aquinas.

²²Sullivan, *Salvation Outside*, 63, 98.

²³Aquinas considered this question in the *Summa*, but it is a matter of debate whether his answer was positive or negative. See Sullivan, *Salvation*, 54–55.

²⁴Sullivan, *Salvation Outside*, 75–76.

²⁵However, it is true that classical Jewish religious sources generally exhibit little, if any, concern with Jesus.

²⁶Sullivan, *Salvation Outside*, 94–99.

any way. Thus, to bow down before a human being in worship is very offensive to God. If a Muslim has been taught, since a very young age, that it is wrong to worship a human being as God, is it necessarily his or her fault if he or she does not accept Jesus as the savior? Some students might reply “yes,” but students appreciate the point. It is helpful to explain that De Lugo was not arguing that the Jew and the Muslim are necessarily saved. Rather, he was simply arguing that salvation is possible for them.

The next chapter in the story is an outcome of the Enlightenment. Rousseau and other critics of Christianity wrote that if a major portion of the world’s population is condemned to hell for simply following the wrong religion, then God must be “the most cruel of tyrants.”²⁷ Thus, the Enlightenment promoted “religious indifferentism,” the idea that it does not matter to which religion one belongs.²⁸ In 1863 Pius IX issued the encyclical *Quanto Conficiamur Moerore* to address a variety of issues, including religious indifferentism. In the face of indifferentism, it reasserted the classic teaching that there is no salvation outside the Church.

Although attacking indifferentism, the Pope addressed the Enlightenment critique of religious exclusivism with a teaching that echoes the ideas of Soto and De Lugo. The encyclical states:

There are, of course, those who are struggling with invincible ignorance about our most holy religion. Sincerely observing the natural law and its precepts inscribed by God on all hearts and ready to obey God, they live honest lives and are able to attain eternal life by the efficacious virtue of divine light and grace. Because . . . his supreme kindness and clemency do not permit anyone at all who is not guilty of deliberate sin to suffer eternal punishments.²⁹

Six years later Pius IX convened the Vatican I, and this idea was taught by the Council.³⁰

This new papal and conciliar teaching caused a dilemma for theologians. On the one hand, there had been the long history of magisterial teaching that there is no salvation outside the Church. On the other hand, the magisterium was then declaring the possibility of exceptions to this doctrine. This was a rift in teaching, and efforts were made to patch it up. Theologians argued about how one might belong to the Church without formally being a member. A wide range of figures discussed the issue, including Johann Franzlein, Antonin Sertillanger, John Henry Newman, Émile Mersch, Yves Congar, Henri De Lubac, and Pius XII.³¹ However, for most undergraduates it is not necessary to cover the

²⁷Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Creed of a Priest of Savoy*, trans. Arthur H. Beattie (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1957), 55.

²⁸Sullivan, *Salvation Outside*, 104–106.

²⁹Pius IX, *Quanto Conficiamur Moerore* §7, in Carlen, *Papal Encyclicals*, 1:370. See also Neuner and Dupuis, *Christian Faith*, 240. However, it is important to realize that Pius IX condemned the idea that “we should at least have good hopes for the eternal salvation of all those who are in no way in the true Church of Christ.” *Syllabus of Errors* §17, in Neuner and Dupuis, *Christian Faith*, 309.

³⁰Sullivan, *Salvation Outside*, 119–22.

³¹*Ibid.*, 118–19, 123–25.

complexities of this issue.

Although efforts were made to patch up the rift in teaching, an explosion was inevitable. This explosion took place in America in the 1940s, in the “Boston Heresy Case.” In the early 1940s, some lay Catholics and Fr. Avery Dulles founded the Saint Benedict Center in Cambridge, Massachusetts. It was meant to be a Catholic cultural and intellectual center. Around 1945, given the atrocities of World War II, there was a growing disillusionment among center members with the direction that Western civilization had taken. Disillusioned, Fr. Leonard Feeney, who was the current chaplain, and other members wished to preserve the purity of traditional Catholic teachings from corrupting influences. Protestantism, secular philosophies, and discoveries in the natural sciences were all considered corrupting influences. They felt that the best way to protect Church teaching was to insist on an absolute distinction between the Catholic Church and all other institutions. Thus, Feeney’s weekly talks and the center’s publications argued forcibly that there is no possibility of salvation outside the Catholic Church.³²

Feeney’s teaching provoked officials in the archdiocese, the Jesuit order, Boston College, and Harvard University. Feeney appealed to Rome for vindication. However, in the 1949 “Letter to the Archbishop of Boston,” Pius XII and the Holy Office condemned Feeney’s teaching and promulgated the idea that salvation is possible for the non-Catholic through a desire to do God’s will. Feeney was not cooperative with his superiors in the Jesuit order and in the Vatican, so in 1953 he was excommunicated for disobedience.³³ One scholar summarized the significance of the case by stating that “doctrinal positions that had been considered rigorous but nonetheless orthodox at an earlier moment . . . were now perceived to be beyond the pale.” In fact, the “collective now declared” these doctrines “to be deviant and even dangerous.”³⁴

In terms of laying out the context for *Lumen Gentium* §16, the significant doctrinal statement in the “Letter to the Archbishop of Boston” is:

To gain eternal salvation it is not always required that a person be incorporated in reality as a member of the Church, but it is required that he belong to it at least in desire and longing. It is not always necessary that this desire be explicit, as it is with catechumens. When a man is invincibly ignorant, God also accepts an implicit desire, so called because it is contained in the good disposition of soul by which a man wants his will to be conformed to God’s will.³⁵

In other words, the document insists that salvation comes through membership in the

³²George B. Pepper, *The Boston Heresy Case in View of the Secularization of Religion: A Case Study in the Sociology of Religion* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1988), 1–5, 11–12, 18–22; Mark Stephen Massa, *Catholics and American Culture: Fulton Sheen, Dorothy Day, and the Notre Dame Football Team* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Co., 1999), 28.

³³Pepper, *Boston Heresy*, 21–37. In the early 1970s the excommunication was lifted. See *ibid.*, 45–52.

³⁴Massa, *Catholics and American Culture*, 35.

³⁵Holy Office, “Letter of the Holy Office to the Archbishop of Boston (1949),” in Neuner and Dupuis, *The Christian Faith*, 257–58. For another expression of this doctrine, see Pius XII *Mystici Corporis* §103.

Church. However, it broadens the notion of membership to include those with an “implicit” desire. A person might have no conscious desire to enter the Church. However, she might desire to conform to God’s will, and implicit in that desire is a desire to enter the Church, since it is God’s will that all enter. Presumably, if that person understood that it is God’s will that all should enter the Church, then she would do so. Centuries earlier, Aquinas had considered the catechumen, someone with an explicit desire to enter the Church, but Pius XII posited the notion of an implicit desire.

The statements of Pius IX, Vatican I, Pius XII, and the Holy Office prepared the way for *Lumen Gentium* §16. However, the document does not rely on the notion of an implicit desire.³⁶ This is probably because the idea received abundant criticism from a variety of theologians. Their objection was that it makes no sense to consider as members those who have no desire to be members. So, instead, *Lumen Gentium* states that one might be “related” to the Church through a knowledge of God.³⁷

Lumen Gentium conceives of those “related” to the Church in terms of concentric circles. The first ring consists of the Jews, given the direct connections between Judaism and Christianity, and given that Christ was a Jew. The second ring consists of the Muslims. Islam does not have the same, direct relationship to Christianity as does Judaism. However, it has a strong notion of a supreme, all-powerful deity. Thus, *Lumen Gentium* states that “the plan of salvation also includes those who acknowledge the Creator. In the first place amongst these there are the Moslems.”³⁸ Next, there are those religions and peoples who do not have a clear concept of an omnipotent deity, but who nevertheless have an awareness of a supreme reality: “Nor is God Himself far distant from those who in shadows and images seek the unknown God, for it is He who gives to all men life and breath and every other gift (cf. Acts 17:25–28), and who as Savior wills that all men be saved (cf. 1 Tim. 2:4). Those also can attain to everlasting salvation who through no fault of their own do not know the gospel of Christ or His Church.”³⁹

Finally, there is the issue of atheism. *Lumen Gentium* states that “nor does divine Providence deny the help necessary for salvation to those who, without blame on their part, have not yet arrived at an explicit knowledge of God, but who strive to live a good life, thanks to His grace.”⁴⁰ Also, *Gaudium et Spes* has some sympathetic words for atheism. On the one hand, it condemns atheistic philosophies as “poisonous doctrines and actions which contradict reason and the common experience of humanity.”⁴¹ On the other hand, Christians who are “deficient in their religious, moral, or social life” contribute to atheism, and atheism raises “weighty” questions that need to be “examined seriously and . . .

³⁶Sullivan, *Salvation Outside*, 151–52. Also, the related statement in *Ad Gentes* §7 focuses simply on inculpable ignorance, not on implicit desire.

³⁷Second Vatican Council, Constitution on the Church (*Lumen Gentium*) §16, in Abbott, *Documents*, 34.

³⁸*Ibid.*, 35.

³⁹*Ibid.*

⁴⁰*Ibid.* In this way, the Council went beyond the “Letter to the Archbishop of Boston,” for the latter had squarely placed the salvation of the non-Christian on an explicit desire to do God’s will.

⁴¹Second Vatican Council, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (*Gaudium et Spes*) §21, in Abbott, *Documents*, 218.

profoundly.”⁴²

Respect for Judaism

Whereas *Lumen Gentium* §16 addresses the salvation of the non-Christian, *Nostra Aetate* addresses the issue of respect for non-Christian religions. The heart of the document is a discussion of Judaism, for *Nostra Aetate* is the product of John XXIII’s initiative to address anti-Judaism at Vatican II. Earlier, in the 1940s, John XXIII, as Cardinal Angelo Roncalli, served as the Vatican ambassador to Turkey. From 1942 to 1944 he helped thousands of Jews escape Europe into Israel.⁴³ Thereby, he became “sensitive to the atrocities of the Holocaust and to the complicity of many Catholics in them.”⁴⁴

In 1958 Roncalli was elected Pope, and in 1960 he met Jules Isaac, a Holocaust survivor. Isaac met with leaders of a variety of Christian denominations, and he argued that anti-Judaism has theological roots in Christianity. He was especially disturbed by the classic accusation of deicide. Isaac “asked the pope whether or not Jews could have some hope from the council. John XXIII reassured him that the council would not be indifferent to the implications of the Holocaust for Catholic theology.”⁴⁵ The Pope thus charged Cardinal Augustine Bea with the task of addressing this issue, which resulted in *Nostra Aetate*.

To address anti-Judaism the bishops relied on Christian Scripture. St. Paul, like other early Christians, was shocked and surprised that the Jewish people, as a whole, did not accept Christ. However, instead of arguing, as Chrysostom later did, that the Jews were abandoned by God, Paul argued that the Jewish refusal to accept Christ was a part of God’s plan. He compared the family of Abraham to a tree and argued that the Jews were being removed from the tree in order to make room for the grafting of new branches. These new branches were the Gentiles, incorporated into the family through their faith in Christ (Rom 11:1–32).

Paul was upset that all of the Jews did not accept Christ, and wrote that their rejection of the Gospel made them, temporarily, “enemies of God” (Rom 10:28). In spite of that, they continued to be beloved by God. This was so due to God’s call to them in the past, because of “their ancestors; for the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable” (Rom 11:28–29). Later, the Jews would be grafted back in, and Abraham’s family will consist of

⁴²Second Vatican Council, Pastoral Constitution (*Gaudium et Spes*) §19, 21, in Abbott, *Documents*, 217–18.

⁴³Massimo Faggioli, *John XXIII: The Medicine of Mercy* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2014), 75.

⁴⁴John O’Malley, *What Happened at Vatican II* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008), 219.

⁴⁵Faggioli, *John XXIII*, 116–17. For a thorough account of the development of *Nostra Aetate* see John Oesterreicher, “Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions,” in Herbert Vorgrimmler, ed., *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*, 5 vols. (New York: Herder & Herder, 1969), 3: 1–136. Another significant study is John Connelly, *From Enemy to Brother: The Revolution in Catholic Teaching on the Jews, 1933–1965* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012). Contrary to the common analysis, Connelly states that “the revolutionary about-face that took place at Vatican II did not flow ‘naturally’ or ‘automatically’ from reflection about the genocide, but rather resulted from struggle among theologians extending from the 1930s to the 1960s: about how to revise centuries of teaching on the crowd’s self-deprecation in Matthew 27” (*Enemy to Brother*, 10).

both Gentiles and Jews (Rom 11:23).⁴⁶

Thus, whereas Chrysostom advised Christians to refrain from even exchanging greetings with Jews, Paul stated with pride that “I myself am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, a member of the tribe of Benjamin” (Rom 11:1). Further, Paul warned his Gentile converts against one-upmanship towards the Jews. He reminded them that the Jews are the root of the Christian mystery, and that “it is not you that support the root, but the root that supports you” (Rom 11:18). Also, being a part of the family of Abraham is not natural to the Gentile convert, for he or she is a part of the family only through the graciousness of God (Rom 11:20–24). Thus, just as God removed the Jews from the tree, so might he remove the Gentile convert to Christ. Hence, the Gentile should not “claim to be wiser” than he or she really is (Rom 11:25).

Nostra Aetate counters anti-Judaism through Pauline doctrine. It states that although “Jerusalem did not recognize the time of her visitation. . . . Nevertheless, according to the Apostle, the Jews still remain most dear to God because of their fathers, for He does not repent of the gifts He makes.”⁴⁷ Chrysostom had focused on the key difference between Judaism and Christianity, which is Jesus Christ, and he concluded on the basis of this difference that the Jews are devil worshippers. However, instead of emphasizing the key difference, *Nostra Aetate* emphasizes the overlap between Christianity and Judaism, and in doing so relies on Paul’s image of the root and branches:

[T]he Church of Christ acknowledges that, according to the mystery of God’s saving design, the beginnings of her faith and her election are already found among the patriarchs . . . likewise that the salvation of the Church was mystically foreshadowed by the chosen people’s exodus from the land of bondage.

The Church, therefore, cannot forget that she received the revelation of the Old Testament through the people with whom God . . . deigned to establish the Ancient Covenant. Nor can she forget that she draws sustenance from the root of that good olive tree onto which have been grafted the wild olive branches of the Gentiles . . . the spiritual patrimony common to Christians and Jews is thus so great.⁴⁸

Regarding the charge of deicide, *Nostra Aetate* states that the death of Christ “cannot be blamed upon all the Jews then living, without distinction, nor upon the Jews of today.”⁴⁹ Furthermore, the point of Christ’s death was to save humanity: “Christ in His boundless love freely underwent His passion and death because of the sins of all men, so that all might

⁴⁶ Paul seems to express a perspective opposite to this in Thessalonians 1:6–9. The question raised by some scholars is whether he was addressing the Jews as a whole, or was targeting a specific faction with whom the Christian community had come into conflict.

⁴⁷ Second Vatican Council, Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions (*Nostra Aetate*) §4, in Abbott, ed., *Documents*, 664.

⁴⁸Ibid., 664–65.

⁴⁹Ibid., 666.

attain salvation.”⁵⁰ Also, whereas Chrysostom advised the Christian not even to exchange greetings with Jews, *Nostra Aetate* praises “brotherly dialogues” and speaks positively of cooperation in biblical and theological studies.⁵¹

Respect for Other Non-Christian Religions

The core of *Nostra Aetate* is its consideration of Judaism, as discussed above. This core is seated within a broader discussion of the religions of the world. However, this broader discussion is not the product of original intention but of historical circumstance. The early 1960s was a time of great tension between Israel and the Arab nations. Arab leaders were concerned that the Catholic Church would wander into the fray and support Israel. Threats were made that if that were to occur, Catholics in the Middle East would be persecuted. Hence, the council fathers were careful to ensure that the document would express support of Judaism, not of Zionism. Further, they transformed what was originally supposed to be a document solely about the Jews into a treatise concerning the religions of the world.⁵²

To address the religions of the world, *Nostra Aetate* relies on Scripture, just as in the case of its discussion of Judaism. However, in this case it takes a very different approach. The Bible and Judaism are integrally bound together, but religions like Hinduism and Buddhism do not appear in the pages of the Bible. Further, the Bible, more often than not, is critical of the religions of Israel’s neighbors. Having no passages to draw on that refer to Hinduism and Buddhism, the council fathers relied on Scripture passages that treat of humanity as a whole. These are passages concerning the account of a common parentage, the injunction that humans should populate all the earth, the idea that signs of God’s goodness are present in nature, statements of God’s universal salvific will, and images of all the nations of earth converging on Jerusalem, or the New Jerusalem. Reflecting on these passages, *Nostra Aetate* concludes that “all peoples comprise a single community, and have a single origin,” and that “one also is their final goal: God.”⁵³

Having used Scripture to frame the issue, *Nostra Aetate* then relies on approaches that were current in religious studies at that time to expand on the topic. It takes the stance that all humans have certain questions in common, such as “where lies the path to true happiness?,” and that different religions offer different answers.⁵⁴ It identifies an evolutionary or developmental pattern in these answers. At the basic level, there are religions that exhibit an awareness of a “hidden power.”⁵⁵ Beyond this, some religions are aware of a supreme being. At the highest level, Christianity knows the supreme being as

⁵⁰Ibid., 667.

⁵¹Ibid., 666. Students sometimes ask about the reception of *Nostra Aetate* in the Jewish community and its impact on Jewish–Christian relations. See Rosenthal, *Jubilee*; Valkenberg and Cirelli, *Nostra Aetate*; and Cohen, Knitter, and Ulrich, *Interreligious Dialogue*. The overall reception has been positive, but for some negative critiques see Rosenthal, *Jubilee*, 245–46, 255–57, 264–65, 318.

⁵²Giuseppe Alberigo, *History of Vatican II*, English version ed. Joseph Komonchak, trans. Matthew O’Connell (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995–2006), 4:546–59.

⁵³Second Vatican Council, Non-Christian Religions (*Nostra Aetate*) §1, in Abbott, ed., *Documents*, 660–61.

⁵⁴Second Vatican Council, Non-Christian Religions (*Nostra Aetate*) §1, in Abbott, ed., *Documents*, 661.

⁵⁵Second Vatican Council, Non-Christian Religions (*Nostra Aetate*) §2, in Abbott, ed., *Documents*, 661.

“Father.”⁵⁶ This developmental approach is parallel to the considerations in *Lumen Gentium*, which arranges the religions in concentric circles, in terms of their similarity or relationship to Christianity, especially in terms of their notions of God.

Buddhism, of all the religions explicitly mentioned, seems the least similar to Christianity, for it does not teach the existence of a supreme, personal, creator god. However, *Nostra Aetate* nevertheless identifies areas of overlap. The key item in common is the diagnosis of the condition of the world. Buddhism teaches, like Christianity, that there is no lasting happiness or satisfaction to be found in this world, that true joy lies elsewhere. The two religions offer different solutions, the extinction of desire in one case and Christ in the other, but their diagnoses of the world are, in broad terms, similar.⁵⁷

Hinduism has notions of divinity that are closer to Christian ideas. The text points out that through stories and philosophy, Hindus have explored deeply the mystery of the divine, and have admirable traditions of asceticism and religious devotion.⁵⁸ Islam, in turn, has notions of God that are very similar to Christian notions. God is considered by Muslims as “one . . . living and enduring, merciful and all-powerful, Maker of heaven and earth.”⁵⁹ Not only is there considerable overlap in the notion of deity, but many of the figures of the Bible appear in the Qur’an, and Muslims revere Abraham, Mary, and Jesus.⁶⁰

The above areas of overlap are important, and *Nostra Aetate* states that the Christian should value “those ways of conduct and of life, those rules and teachings which, though differing in many particulars from what she holds and sets forth, nevertheless often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men.”⁶¹ Having pointed out the shared grounds between Christianity and other religions, the document concludes that “we cannot in truthfulness call upon God who is the Father of all if we refuse to act in a brotherly way toward certain men. . . . the Church rejects, as foreign to the mind of Christ, any discrimination against men or harassment of them because of their race, color, condition of life, or religion. . . this sacred Synod ardently implores the Christian faithful to ‘maintain good fellowship among the nations’ (1 Pet. 2:12).”⁶²

Student Questions and Reactions

The Issue of Inconsistency

Overall, students react positively to these developments in Catholic teaching. Many of them feel, independently of anything that the Church has taught them, that non-Christians can be saved and that interreligious dialogue should be supported. To learn that current Church teaching is, in some ways, congruent with what they already believe, is a welcome surprise to them. In spite of this positive response, there can be some objections

⁵⁶Ibid.

⁵⁷Second Vatican Council, Non-Christian Religions (*Nostra Aetate*) §2, in Abbott, ed., *Documents*, 662.

⁵⁸Second Vatican Council, Non-Christian Religions (*Nostra Aetate*) §2, in Abbott, ed., *Documents*, 661.

⁵⁹Second Vatican Council, Non-Christian Religions (*Nostra Aetate*) §3, in Abbott, ed., *Documents*, 663.

⁶⁰Ibid.

⁶¹Second Vatican Council, Non-Christian Religions (*Nostra Aetate*) §2, in Abbott, ed., *Documents*, 662.

⁶²Second Vatican Council, Non-Christian Religions (*Nostra Aetate*) §5, in Abbott, ed., *Documents*, 667–68.

and reservations. What troubles the students the most is the issue of inconsistency. They know that the Church has had a predominantly negative stance towards other religions, and to see the Church now assuming a different stance can seem disingenuous to them.⁶³ However, by carefully giving them the historical background information covered in the earlier sections of this paper, students are satisfied. They understand how and why the Church changed its stance.

The second inconsistency that troubles them, but to a lesser degree, concerns Scripture. They see no references in Scripture to being saved by being “related” to the Church, or being saved because one is “invincibly” ignorant. More to the point, Church teaching is inconsistent with exclusivist statements in Scripture, with which students are familiar.⁶⁴ In addressing this further issue, this paper will not attempt a comprehensive and definitive exegesis of Scripture on these matters. Also, it will not spend much space on exclusivist statements from the Bible, since students are already well aware of some of them, and are asking their questions with these statements in mind. Neither will this paper offer a new theology of religions that will satisfy the probing questions of theologians. Rather, it will simply defend *Nostra Aetate* and *Lumen Gentium* §16 on the basis of scriptural considerations.

A good starting point in addressing the issue of Scripture is to show that although there is a preponderance of exclusivist statements in the Bible, there are also statements that are universalist in scope. These include those referred to by *Nostra Aetate*, which were discussed above. A further, key passage is 1 Tim 2:4, God “desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.” In addition, whereas Jn 14:6 states that “no one comes to the Father except through me,” Jn 1:4 states that the Word is “the light of all people.”⁶⁵

There is a tension in the Bible between exclusivist and universalist perspectives, and *Lumen Gentium* §16 essentially offers a resolution of them. The resolution is that although baptism is necessary for salvation, exceptions are possible through a knowledge—even if dim—of God. It is true that the discussion in *Lumen Gentium* §16 of being saved by being “related” to the Church does not appear in Scripture.⁶⁶ However, this notion is used by the document as a human construct to resolve two opposing trends in the biblical texts.⁶⁷

⁶³ Ironically, this can upset the liberal leaning students more than conservative leaning students. The reason is that the latter tend to have a better grasp of what the magisterium currently teaches on this issue, whereas it is more of a surprise to the liberal students.

⁶⁴ The thrust of these concerns is good. Much of today’s “theology of religions” proceeds without much reference to Scripture, basing itself instead on doctrinal and philosophical considerations. However, theology is reflection on the “sacred page,” and so discussions in the theology of religions should involve the Bible more directly.

⁶⁵ For a discussion of universalistic passages in the Bible, see John Sanders, *No Other Name: An Investigation into the Destiny of the Unevangelized* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2001), 83–89.

⁶⁶ Also, as D’Costa points out, God granting mercy in the face of ignorance is not an unscriptural notion. See D’Costa, *Vatican II*, 63n8; Lk 12:47–48; and 1 Tim 1:13–14.

⁶⁷ Naturally, other denominations reconcile these perspectives in other ways. For instance, for some Christians, universalistic statements underscore the importance of working to make the acceptance of Christ universal. Others speculate about post-mortem conversions to Christ. For three different evangelical

In addition to explaining *Lumen Gentium* §16 as a resolution between exclusivist and universalist perspectives, one can focus more directly on John 14:6, arguing that it can be understood in ways other than a strict exclusivism. To begin, the Gospel states that Jesus is the “way” to the Father, but it is not using the word “salvation.” In fact, one of the few places the word is used in John’s Gospel is the passage, “salvation is from the Jews” (Jn 4:22).⁶⁸ What, then, is the significance of John 14:6? As one exegete states, the passage “is not a general metaphysical statement about ‘God’; Jesus does not say ‘No one comes to God except through me,’ but ‘No one comes to the *Father* except through me,’ and the specificity of that theological nomenclature needs to be taken seriously.”⁶⁹ Jesus brings a new experience of God, an experience of God as father: “Jesus is the tangible presence of God in the world and . . . God the Father can be known only through that incarnate presence. Humanity’s encounter with Jesus brings a new, unique, and decisive experience of God.”⁷⁰ However, contrary to what Chrysostom taught in the fourth century, this new and definitive experience does not mean that there can be no relationship with God apart from Christ, that any worship apart from Christ is necessarily worship of the devil.

Furthermore, one can point out that many scriptural exegetes believe that the author of John’s Gospel had in mind, by the “Word” in John 1, the *logos* of Greek philosophy. Hence, “The varieties of religious speculations that receive expression in the *logos* in the Hellenistic world are subsumed by John into the revelation of God in Jesus.”⁷¹ Thus, there might be ways of relating to the Word other than through the historical incarnation. (However, it is a matter of controversy among Scripture scholars whether the author of John had the *logos* of Greek philosophy in mind.⁷²)

The Issue of Displacement

Also, whilst the issue for most students is inconsistency, the issue for some is displacement. First, students with an evangelical and/or fundamentalist background are sometimes concerned about the role of Jesus. If Jesus is the only savior, how can there be salvation in a situation where there is no reference to him? It can be inconceivable to them that salvation might take place without an explicit confession of faith in Christ. This evangelical emphasis on choice reflects a long, biblical tradition. For instance, a major theme of the Hebrew Scriptures is making a definitive choice for the God of Israel, as opposed to other gods. Further, a major theme of John’s Gospel is making an unambiguous choice for Christ.

Second, while some students are concerned about Scripture and the role of Jesus,

perspectives on these issues, see Gabriel J. Fackre, Ronald H. Nash, and John Sanders, *What About Those Who Have Never Heard?: Three Views on the Destiny of the Unevangelized* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995).

⁶⁸ I am grateful to Catherine Cory for pointing this out to me.

⁶⁹ Abingdon Press, *The New Interpreter’s Bible: General Articles & Introduction, Commentary, & Reflections for Each Book of the Bible, Including the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books*, 12 vols. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1994), 9:744 (hereafter abbreviated as NIB).

⁷⁰ NIB, 9:743. Also see the helpful discussion of Matthew 7:13–14 in NIB, 8:216.

⁷¹ NIB, 9:519.

⁷² John might not have had the *logos* of Greek philosophy in mind, but Justin Martyr understood Christ in this way. See Justin Martyr, *Second Apology* §10 in A. Cleveland Cox, trans., Roberts, Donaldson, and Cox, eds., *Ante-Nicene Fathers* 1:191–92.

some are concerned about the issue of the Church. If people can be saved outside the Church, what role does it play? In that regard, the idea that the atheist can be saved can elicit especial exasperation. If even the atheist can be saved it seems that the Church is arguing its own irrelevance, that it has no job to do. It seems as though the Church is simply capitulating on all the issues and is refusing to draw a line. In my experience, students who raise this issue are not asking the abstract question of how grace can be mediated to those outside the Church. Rather, their concern is more concrete: Does the Church have any role or place in society if the non-Christian can be saved? Does the Church make a difference in the world?

Regarding the salvation of non-Christians, a good starting point is to show that the Church frankly admits that it is a difficult point, an enigma: “The Holy Spirit in a manner known only to God offers to every man the possibility of being associated with this paschal mystery.”⁷³ Although this is a helpful point, it only begins to scratch the surface of the issues. Going beyond this point, some reconceptualization of Christ and human relationships with him is needed. To begin, the understanding that many students have of Scripture is confined to the historical level. If a biblical story is void of historical reality, then it appears to them to be void of meaning. Likewise, they tend to see Christ strictly as a historical reality. If there is no direct link to Christ’s historicity, then he appears to some students to be absent. However, if Jesus is more than a historical reality, but is a spiritual and incorporeal reality, and the lord of the cosmos, then he is everywhere.

Scripture can be used to expand the students’ notion of Jesus, from a strictly historical reality to a pan-cosmic reality. As is known, the Church fathers identified the personification of wisdom in the Greek Scriptures with Christ. Through exposure to such passages, students can come to conceive of Christ in an incorporeal way. One such passage is: “Wisdom is more mobile than any motion; because of her pureness she pervades and penetrates all things. For she is a breath of the power of God, and a pure emanation of the glory of the Almighty” (Wis 7:24–25). Another passage states, “I came forth from the mouth of the Most High, and covered the earth like a mist” (Sir 24:3).⁷⁴ (However, since Wisdom and Sirach are not included in Protestant versions of the Bible this approach might not be effective for some students, although it does challenge all students to think of Christ in a different way. In these cases, Col 1: 15–20 could be used.)

The above points can be drawn together with a statement by the scriptural exegete, James Dunn: “The limitation of effective mediation to Christ Jesus is not to exclude from salvation those who have not heard of Christ, but to affirm that effective mediation, wherever it is experienced, will be found to have been mediated through Christ.”⁷⁵ In other words, salvation is always through Christ, but this does not mean that he is always known and recognized. Further, the point of the incarnation was not to condemn but to save: “God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world

⁷³ Second Vatican Council, Pastoral Constitution (*Gaudium et Spes*) §22, in Abbott, *Documents*, 222.

⁷⁴ See also Prov 8:27–31. For some magisterial teachings about the Holy Spirit being present to all, see Second Vatican Council, Pastoral Constitution (*Gaudium et Spes*) §22, in Abbott, *Documents*, 222; John Paul II, *Redemptoris Hominis* §13 in *Origins* 8.40 (March 22, 1979): 625–43 (633); and John Paul II, “The Meaning of the Day of Peace in Assisi,” *Origins* 16.31 (January 15, 1987): 561–63, at 563.

⁷⁵ NIB, 11:798.

might be saved through him” (John 3:17).

Yet, the issue needs to be addressed further. For many American Christians, especially those of an evangelical persuasion, making a decisive choice for Jesus Christ lies at the heart of salvation. Christ might be operative everywhere, but how can there be salvation without a choice for him? One can approach the issue of a decisive choice through the distinction between explicit and implicit faith. Centuries ago, as argued above, De Soto used this distinction to discuss the possibility of the salvation of non-Christians. More recently, Karl Rahner discussed it in terms of a surrender to the depths of being.

Approaches involving the distinction between implicit and explicit faith do not directly engage biblical material, but the Bible can be drawn upon to rethink the relationship with Christ. In numerous scriptural passages, a connection between the kingdom of God and care of the poor is made. For instance, in the first chapter of Luke’s Gospel is an image that runs through much of the Bible. There, Mary praised God with the words, “He has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things” (Lk 1:51–53). Likewise, at the start of his public ministry, Jesus read aloud in the synagogue from Isaiah: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor” (Lk 4:18). Hence, if Jesus ushers in the kingdom of God, and if a human, out of compassion, actively contributes to the dawning of this age, is one not making a choice for Jesus? In taking a stand for the poor is one not standing with Jesus?

There are two Scripture stories, in particular, that support the idea that standing with the oppressed is making a choice for Jesus. Matthew’s Gospel (Matt 25: 31–46), in the story of the sheep and the goats, says that two parties will be separated from each other on judgment day. The first party, the goats, did not help the poor and the needy, but the second did. Jesus will tell the former that they did not help him when he was hungry and thirsty, whereas the latter did. Both parties will be surprised, the first not realizing that they overlooked Jesus and the other not realizing that they helped Jesus. Jesus will respond, explaining that when the hungry were fed that he was fed, and when the thirsty were given water that he was given water.⁷⁶ As one scholar states, “The fundamental thrust of this scene is that when people respond to human need, or fail to respond, they are in fact responding, or failing to respond, to Christ.”⁷⁷

Turning to Luke’s Gospel, the parable of the good Samaritan (Lk 10:29–37) seems

⁷⁶ Given that the poor in the parable are referred to as “brothers,” it has been argued that the parable does not apply to the poor in general, but to Christians in need or distress. For a response to this, see NIB, 8:455–56. Also, in this regard, it is good to remember that, according to Christian tradition, Jesus was “a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity; and as one from whom others hide their faces” (Isa. 53:3).

⁷⁷ NIB, 8:456. Also helpful is the admonition that “not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven” (Matt 7:21). Kristin Johnson makes a related point about the story of Zacchaeus in Luke’s Gospel: “There is no mention of that Zacchaeus believes in Jesus” (Kristin Largen Johnston, *Baby Krishna, Infant Jesus* [Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011], 180). Instead, he decides to give away a major portion of his wealth and to make amends with those whom he cheated.

to make the same point.⁷⁸ This parable is beloved and has a variety of different interpretations, including lessons against hypocrisy and lessons about reconciliation between opposing parties. Another lesson to be learned from it is that God values compassion over orthodoxy. It is generally told that the Jews looked down on the Samaritans, but it is often not told why they looked down on them. A reason is that they followed a form of Judaism that had been corrupted by nonbiblical beliefs and practices from Assyria (2 Kings 17:1–41). In the story, a priest and a Levite passed by the beaten man without stopping to help. In doing so they were following biblical rules about maintaining ritual purity. Although the priest and the Levite were following orthodox behavior, it was the compassion of the Samaritan, in spite of his unorthodox beliefs and practices, that God valued. One can transpose this into a Christian context. Perhaps exhibiting compassion is sometimes more significant than articulating the correct beliefs about Jesus.

This train of thought might appear, to some, as an argument for salvation through works rather than through faith. However, the point is that acts of compassion might, in some cases, be an implicit faith in Christ. One might not confess the name of Jesus with one’s lips, but if Jesus is the one who brings “good news to the poor” (Lk 4:18), and if one stands with the poor, might this be a choice for Jesus, an implicit faith in him? Further, the sheep in Matthew and the good Samaritan in Luke were acting out of compassion, not out of a desire to be saved. Their concern was with the needy, not with earning something for themselves.

As discussed above, while some students are concerned about Scripture and the role of Jesus, some are concerned about the issue of the Church. If people can be saved outside the Church, what role does it play? One can point out that the authors of *Lumen Gentium* did not consider the Church to be made irrelevant by this teaching, that this teaching should diminish missionary activity.⁷⁹ Rather, after declaring the possibility that the non-Christian can be saved, the document reminds the reader that it was Jesus’ commandment that his apostles should “make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Matt 28:19).⁸⁰ This is a good starting point, but more is needed. Just as current Church teaching on the salvation of non-Christians requires some rethinking of Jesus, so it also requires some rethinking of the nature of the Church and of salvation itself.⁸¹

To begin, most people have in mind by the term, “Catholic Church,” the vast international edifice of the hierarchy. However, people need to think of the Church as primarily a community gathered in faith around Christ. The spark behind the Church is the human need to gather: the Church had its beginnings in people who, responding to their encounters with Christ, banded together to form communities. Thereby, they would

⁷⁸ Also appropriate is the story of the ten lepers, Lk 17:11–19.

⁷⁹ In fact, Gavin D’Costa argues that *Lumen Gentium* §16 and *Nostra Aetate* are greatly overshadowed by the missionary teachings of the Council (*Vatican II*, 112).

⁸⁰ Matt 28:19, cited in Second Vatican Council, Constitution on the Church (*Lumen Gentium*) §17, in Abbott, *Documents*, 35.

⁸¹ I have not had a chance to introduce, in the classroom, the ideas that follow concerning the Church. Thus, the discussion that follows is experimental in nature, and was prompted by the comments of a reviewer.

celebrate, renew, and deepen their relationship with Christ.⁸² The Church is not simply a means to salvation but a response to salvation, and in that way it is integral to salvation.

Further, to view the Church as irrelevant to salvation is to take an individualistic view of salvation. In contrast, the Bible's approach to salvation is collective. In the Hebrew Scriptures, God's consistent concern was with the Israelite people as a whole, not simply with individuals. God chose particular individuals, but he did so for the sake of the larger community. Likewise, the Letter to the Ephesians shows that to have faith in Christ is to become a part of a larger reality: "You are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord" (Eph 2:19–21).

Finally, salvation in much of the Bible is not about transportation to a remote heaven but about the transformation of the earth. It is, for instance, about a world where "the wolf and the lamb shall feed together" and "the lion shall eat straw like the ox" (Isa 65:25). Likewise, *Lumen Gentium* reflects the collectivist and this-worldly view of salvation by reminding the reader, after asserting that the non-Christian can be saved, that "the entire world" should "become the People of God" so that "there may be rendered to the Creator and Father of the Universe all honor and glory."⁸³ The Church is a concrete body in the world, and as such, it has the potential to be an agent of transformation.

Emotional Reactions

The final set of concerns is not about inconsistencies or displacement. Rather, these are feelings of resentment against the idea that the non-Christian can be saved. Lying at the root of such resentment might be a prejudice against the non-Christian. The Book of Jonah addresses this issue. God was going to overthrow the city of Nineveh because of the sins of the people. To save them from that fate, God sent Jonah to call them to repentance. However, Nineveh was one of the capitals of Assyria, and the Assyrians were deeply resented for their cruel rule. Thus, Jonah tried to avoid God's call to prophesy to them by fleeing on a ship. Later, after Nineveh had repented, Jonah sulked about it, saying, "it is better for me to die than to live" (Jon 4:3). However, God reprimanded Jonah, "Should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons . . . and also many animals?" (Jon 4:11). In other words, whereas the human being might be enveloped in resentment, God might exhibit a concern for all.

Also, rather than prejudice, what can lie at the root of the resentment over the salvation of the non-Christian is envy. Jesus is the cherished treasure of Christians, but is he present to other peoples as well? This issue arose in Jesus' own time. In Luke's Gospel, the disciples displayed displeasure when they saw someone, who was not one of them,

⁸² Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, trans. & ed. Caridad Inda and Johan Eagleson (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988), 143–50.

⁸³ Second Vatican Council, Constitution on the Church (*Lumen Gentium*) §17, in Abbott, *Documents*, 36–37. See also the related insights of Sullivan in *Salvation Outside*, 156–61; and O'Collins in *Second Vatican Council*, 61–68.

casting out demons in Jesus’ name. They tried to stop him, but Jesus replied, “Do not stop him; for whoever is not against you is for you” (Lk 9:50). Also, Jesus stated in John’s Gospel, “I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold” (Jn 10:16). Jesus challenged his disciples to think beyond the boundaries of their group and heritage.

Finally, lying at the root of the resentment might be a sense of having been cheated. The sentiment is, “I have it right, I did my homework, why do others get this reward when they were not right and did not do their homework?” In giving this reaction students are responding, in part, to lessons they have learned as they have matured. They have learned that sometimes an accounting is demanded, and at that time no one is interested in excuses. At that point one either measures up or one does not, and if one does not one loses out.

Lessons like this help one to mature, but the professor can explain that God’s ways are not human ways, that his justice does not always meet human ideas of justice: “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts” (Isa 55:8). More to the point, one can cite the parable of the vineyard and the laborers. In that story each laborer was paid the same, regardless of whether he or she had worked all day or had come in the last hours of the day. The master’s reply to the objection of workers who had worked long and hard is: “Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous? So the last will be first, and the first will be last” (Matt 20:13–16).⁸⁴ Also, “The compassion of human beings is for their neighbors, but the compassion of the Lord is for every living thing. He . . . turns them back, as a shepherd his flock” (Sir 18:13).

Other Directions

The goals of my lectures on *Lumen Gentium* §16 and *Nostra Aetate* are somewhat circumscribed. I simply want students to grasp the current, formal teachings of the Catholic Church on the possibility of the salvation of non-Christians and respect for other religions. Further, I consider grasping the broader context and historical development of those teachings as essential to understanding them. Through all this, I hope to promote respect for the non-Christian world and to combat widespread ignorance about the Church’s formal position on these issues. Beyond these aims, one can explore the limitations of *Nostra Aetate*.

As discussed above, student reactions to *Lumen Gentium* §16 and *Nostra Aetate* are generally positive. When objections arise, they generally concern the issue of inconsistency.

⁸⁴ According to exegetes, this parable is not about the insider jealous of the outsider who is rewarded, but rather about insiders jealous of other insiders (NIB, 8:393). Nevertheless, the parable seems applicable to the issue at hand. The idea that God is free to dispense salvation according to his will, not according to human ideas of what is right, is used by some Christians to argue the scarcity of salvation. However, the thrust of the parable of the vineyard and the laborers is generosity on the part of the master. The parable of the prodigal son is also relevant. The older son had been faithful, and was upset that the younger brother was so warmly celebrated.

Unless I broach the topic in class, rarely do students object that the documents are not open or broad enough. I think the reason is that the students, both Christian and non-Christian, are simply surprised and happy to see a positive affirmation of non-Christian religions, regardless of how qualified or limited that affirmation may be.

I break open the topic of limitations by introducing Karl Rahner's theology of religion, followed by John Hick's ideas. Hick rejects the long historical development towards inclusivist stances as epicycles modifying an outmoded theory, the idea that all salvation is through Christ alone.⁸⁵ Hick replaces inclusivism with the idea that each religion gives direct access to the ultimate reality. This seems to be a more open position. However, whereas Rahner and *Nostra Aetate* reduce the valuable aspects of the non-Christian world to sameness, to Christ, Hick reduces religious doctrines, ultimately, to irrelevance. In his conception, they are only human constructions that do not give any real insight into the nature of ultimate reality.⁸⁶

There are many attempts to break out of the impasse. For instance, Jacques Dupuis offers a complex and refined version of inclusivism.⁸⁷ Also, Raimundo Panikkar asserts that every religion is a center, but that there is no ultimate center.⁸⁸ Such approaches are conceptual in nature. Breaking out of such conceptual approaches, James Fredericks focuses on cultivating interreligious friendships, and leaving theory aside.⁸⁹ John Thatamanil attempts to undercut the approaches of both Rahner and Hick by shifting away from the generalities of the term, "religion." He states that "the genuine alternative to both options is a new theology of religious diversity that focuses on specificity and speaks only rarely and cautiously about religions as such or as a whole."⁹⁰

In addition to exploring the limitations of *Nostra Aetate*, there is, probably more importantly, constructive work to be done on its basis. Particularly, there is the possibility of using it as a starting point not just for respecting the religious other, but for promoting dialogue and encounter. I have not used the document for that end in the classroom, but there is a history at my university of public talks, interreligious volunteer projects, faith-sharing groups, and *iftar* meals. Further, this is a growing, developing story.

⁸⁵ Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity*, trans. William V. Dych (New York: Seabury Press, 1978), 311–21; John Hick, *The Second Christianity* (London: SCM Press, 1983), 81–82.

⁸⁶ John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent*, 2nd ed., (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004), 233–49; see also James L. Fredericks, *Faith among Faiths: Christian Theology and Non-Christian Religions* (New York: Paulist Press, 1999), 113–16.

⁸⁷ Jacques Dupuis, *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997), 205–208.

⁸⁸ Raimundo Panikkar, "Religious Pluralism: The Metaphysical Challenge," in Leroy S. Rouner, ed., *Religious Pluralism* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 110–11; Raimundo Panikkar, ed. and trans., *The Vedic Experience: Mantramajjari* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), 656–58.

⁸⁹ Fredericks, *Faith among Faiths*, 173–77.

⁹⁰ John Thatamanil, "Learning from (and Not Just about) Our Religious Neighbors: Comparative Theology and the Future of *Nostra Aetate*," in Cohen, Knitter, and Rosenhagen, *Interreligious Dialogue*, 297.

“The Catholic Church and the Non-Christian World: Teaching Lumen Gentium §16 and Nostra Aetate”

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