



The Second Vatican Council on Other Religions Revisited

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Abstract

My *The Second Vatican Council on Other Religions* (Oxford University Press) appeared in 2012. In 2014 it went into a paperback edition, which allowed me to list some reviews and promise to enter into dialogue with all the reviewers. This article takes up such dialogue and discusses what came from nine reviewers. Glenn Siniscalchi wrote two reviews. Eduardo Echeverria went much further by writing two long essays on the book.

Keywords

Catherine Cornille, Jacques Dupuis, Eduardo Echeverria, James Heft, Leo Lefebure, Other Religions, Glenn Siniscalchi, Vatican II

In 2012, Oxford University Press published my *The Second Vatican Council on Other Religions*. When the work enjoyed a paperback edition in 2014, I listed some reviews and promised to enter into dialogue with all reviews that I could locate. This article redeems the promise and discusses what came from nine reviewers. One of them (Glenn Siniscalchi) wrote two reviews, and Eduardo Echeverria went further by writing two essays on the book.

To introduce the discussion with the reviewers, let me explain the origin of this work. Being involved for years in the debate over a landmark book by Jacques Dupuis, *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism*,¹ I concluded after his death in late 2005 that what the discussion needed was a thorough account both of the biblical background and of Vatican II's teaching. Oxford University Press published in 2007 my *Salvation for All: God's Other Peoples*; it drew on the

¹ Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1997; the book appeared simultaneously in English, French and Italian; it appeared later in Spanish and Portuguese. For an insider's account of the debate about this work and the challenge it met from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, see G. O'Collins, *On the Left Bank of the Tiber* (Brisbane, Australia: Connor Court Publishing, 2013), 213–51.

Jewish and Christian Scriptures for a positive account of the redemptive possibilities offered to all people. In 2012 OUP published *The Second Vatican Council on Other Religions*. It retrieved earlier Christian teaching on other religious faiths, before reflecting on the sea change found in such teaching at Vatican II and its subsequent reception (above all, by Pope St John Paul II and Jacques Dupuis).

The titles (and content) of these two books followed Dupuis in studiously avoiding the term ‘non-Christian’, not least because I wished to avoid giving a negative name to groups of religious believers. John Paul II, but not Dupuis, kept the question of the Jewish people and the Jewish religious faith in mind. Should we talk, for example, of the first people of God with their covenant that has never been revoked? Do they embrace a religious faith that is not truly ‘other’ than Christianity? What of the Second Vatican Council’s teaching on the Jewish people, a theme which Leo Lefebure rightly brought up in his review and which I had mistakenly declined to treat?

Let me list alphabetically in a note the reviews, and then refer to them within the text itself. The discussion will be divided into two parts: eight reviewers in the first section; and then, given the length and nature of his essays, Echeverria in a separate second section.²

Eight Reviews

It may be useful to hear some positive remarks from reviewers before moving on to engage their queries and challenges. Blosser wrote of ‘a very accessible book on the highly relevant topic of world religions through the specific lens of Vatican II. This well-researched book has a clear, readable style, and could easily be used in an undergraduate or graduate course’. Heft’s praise also evoked the needs of classrooms: ‘we should be grateful for O’Collins’s courage and scholarship. This book should be used in advanced undergraduate and graduate courses, as well as by all interested scholars’.

Colberg’s evaluation focused on Vatican II: ‘O’Collins advances key questions regarding the Council’s theology as a whole... Those interested in studying and teaching Vatican II are indebted to O’Collins for providing such an important and needed resource’. Serious

² J. P. Blosser, *Choice: Current Reviews for Academic Libraries* 51 (2013), 657; Kristin Colberg, *Heythrop Journal* 55 (2014), 493–94; Catherine Cornille, *Theology* 117 (2014), 149–50; Eduardo Echeverria, ‘Vatican II and the Religions: A Review Essay’, *Nova et Vetera* 13 (2015), 837–73; Echeverria, ‘Ad Father O’Collins’, *Nova et Vetera* 15 (2017), 1251–79; James Heft, *Theological Studies* 75 (2014), 194–95; Marco La Loggia, *Cristianesimo nella storia* 36 (2015), 232–35; Leo Lefebure, *Journal of Religion* 95 (2015), 127–29; Michael McCabe, *Irish Theological Quarterly* 79 (2014), 285–87; Glenn B. Siniscalchi, *Heythrop Journal* 60 (2019), 493–95; Siniscalchi, *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 53 (2018), 617–18.

interest in the Council also provided the lens for Cornille's reflections: 'the Second Vatican Council has been a turning point in the attitude of the Catholic Church to other religions...[This] is commonly accepted, though rarely argued with such detail and depth as [by] O'Collins'.

La Loggia set the volume in the context of some of my earlier works. He recognized my 'historical-critical methodology', which allowed me to display the 'interdependence' between history and theology and the issues faced by those who participated in Vatican II (233). For interpreters of the Council, the crucial question became 'the proportion of change and discontinuity' (235).

Lefebure declared the book 'overall a masterful discussion by an experienced interpreter'. McCabe called the work 'a gem, [a] clear, balanced, and very readable book'.

Siniscalchi spoke of a 'careful treatment of the biblical and conciliar texts [that] is continuously accurate and informative' (*Journal of Ecumenical Studies*).

What specific themes did the reviewers pick out? We find Colberg, for instance, reflecting on at least four such themes. First, she found it well worth retrieving what the Scriptures and tradition have taught and implied about God's will to save all people and the Church's role in mediating salvation. Specifically, the Pauline understanding of Christ as the new Adam leads us to grasp his salvific union with all human beings. Second, Colberg agreed that there could be no salvation without revelation; the divine self-communication embraced salvific and revelatory elements. If other religions are to be in some sense 'ways of salvation', they must also be 'ways of revelation'. We face the question, as Heft expresses it, do 'those religions offer their adherents elements of divinely revealed truths that they can access through faith?' Third, to grasp the full scope of Vatican II's teaching on the religious situation of other faiths we must look beyond *Lumen gentium* (the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church) and *Nostra aetate* (the Declaration on Non-Christian Religions) to include teaching from *Sacrosanctum concilium* (the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy), *Ad gentes* (the Decree on the Church's Missionary Activity), *Gaudium et spes* (the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World), and other documents. Fourth, Colberg appreciated my reflections on the omnipresence of the Holy Spirit, a creative development found in John Paul II's teaching. 'Outside the Spirit, there is no salvation'. But there is no possibility of being outside the Spirit. Heft also recognized the importance of recognizing the Holy Spirit actively present in other religions and cultures.

Heft's review showed him interested in the theology of religions which Jacques Dupuis had developed and which led to his being challenged by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF).³

³ Heft pays considerable attention to Dupuis and speaks of the 1991 document of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, 'Dialogue and Proclamation'. Heft adds:

Where Cornille, Echeverria, and McCabe are also prompted by Chapter 9 ('Jacques Dupuis's Contribution to Interreligious Dialogue') to reflect on Dupuis's theology, Blosser, Colberg, and Siniscalchi remain silent about Dupuis, the criticisms he faced, and the contribution he made.

Apropos of the question of the divine self-communication to followers of other religions, Heft accepts such self-communication as meaning that these believers would be saved *through*, not *despite*, their religious teachings and practices. Such language is anathema to Echeverria but finds support from Karl Rahner's common-sense conviction about Christ as universal revealer and redeemer. Given their historical situation, it can only be within the religious system at their disposal that adherents of 'other' religions will come to know the self-revealing God and through faith enjoy a saving relationship with God.⁴

Heft also recalls my desire to show that the priesthood of Christ is highly relevant to the theology—better named the Christology—of religions. In his high priestly prayer, the crucified and risen Lord continues to intercede for all people and not merely for baptized Christians. Francis Sullivan and Gavin D'Costa introduced, albeit briefly and within limits, the theme of such prayer. Dupuis had nothing to say about the priesthood of Christ and misunderstood prayer as a 'merely moral' cause, whereas classical theologians called it a (personal) efficient cause.

A number of reasons converge to explain this surprising silence about Christ's high priestly prayer. Many theologians show little desire to introduce (1) prayer, (2) Christ's priesthood (as set out in Hebrews), and (3) the liturgical teaching of *Sacrosanctum Concilium* into their work—particularly, into their reflections on 'other religions'. I do not know any scholar in this field who has taken up the implications of a passage which Vatican II's constitution on the sacred liturgy took over, albeit without attribution, from *Mediator Dei* (no. 144), a 1947 encyclical published by Pope Pius XII: 'Jesus Christ, the High Priest of the New and Eternal Covenant, when he assumed a human nature, introduced into this land of exile the hymn that in heaven is sung throughout all ages, He unites the whole community of human kind with himself and associates it with him in singing this divine canticle of praise' (SC 83). La Loggia (233), unless I missed something, was the only reviewer to note the reference to Christ the Cosmic Choirmaster.

The High Priest of the Eternal Covenant continues his work of intercession through the Church. It is 'ceaselessly engaged in praising the

'according to O'Collins', Dupuis 'played a major role in its drafting'. We have Michael, now Cardinal Michael, Fitzgerald, who was secretary of that council when it prepared the 1991 text, also on record for recalling Dupuis's major role in drafting the document.

⁴ O'Collins, *The Second Vatican Council on Other Religions*, 162–63.

Lord [understood here as the Father] and interceding for the salvation of the whole world' (SC 83).⁵

For me personally, the most perceptive and helpful review came from Lefebure. He alone appreciated the significance of the teaching coming from the Third Council of Constantinople for the debate over the theology of religions proposed by Dupuis. That Council upheld the presence in Christ of a complete human nature with all its human operations, and so defended a duality of natures and their operations but within the unity of the same personal agent. This teaching served to support the theology of Dupuis, even if he himself hardly took any notice of it.⁶ While the divine nature and its operations infinitely transcend the human nature and its operations, there is no activity of the incarnate Word independent of the humanity assumed at the incarnation.

Apart from a brief remark from Blosser, Lefebure alone noted, and at length, 'the greatest structural weakness' of my discussion: the decision to leave aside any discussion of Vatican II's teaching on the Jewish people.⁷

Lefebure quotes what John Paul II said on the occasion of his 1986 visit (April 13, 1986) to the Great Synagogue in Rome: 'the Jewish religion...is in a certain way "intrinsic" to our own religion'. As a Catholic Christian, I experience constantly the Jewish religion being 'intrinsic' to Christianity—not least through the eucharistic presence of the crucified and resurrected body of Jesus the Jew. Nothing else embeds me more deeply in Jewish faith, and delivers me from any sense of being thereby engaged religiously in the activity of 'others'.

As Lefebure says, 'Catholics have learned to interpret Jesus Christ and the Bible in new ways in relation to the Jewish heritage'. One should specify that this living 'heritage' includes, above all, the eucharistic presence of a gloriously risen and transformed Jew, the risen Christ himself.

A powerful concern for the Church's relations with Jews in the post-Holocaust situation drove Pope St John XXIII, Cardinal Augustin Bea, and other leaders at Vatican II to produce a declaration on the Jewish people (*Nostra aetate*, 4) in a text that also deals with the Church's relationship with Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims, and adherents of other religions. As Lefebure observes, 'changes in the church's relation with Jews and Judaism inevitably have implications' for 'every other interreligious relationship'. At the Council and later, 'this transformation' of the Church's relationship with the Jewish people (expressed above all by *Nostra aetate* 4 and *Lumen gentium* 16) 'should in principle affect every other interreligious discussion' (italics mine).

⁵ Ibid., 65–67.

⁶ See further G. O'Collins, 'Jacques Dupuis: The Ongoing Debate', *Theological Studies* 74 (2013), 632–54, at 646–48.

⁷ Ibid., viii.

Hence the Holy See has a Pontifical Commission for Religious Relations with Jews, linked to the Pontifical Council for Christian Unity and separate from the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue. Michael Barnes, author of *Waiting on Grace: A Theology of Dialogue* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), has produced a foundational theology of dialogue between Christianity and other religions, reinvigorated by a distinct dialogue with the Jewish faith in a post-Holocaust world.

Such a dialogue will raise, for example, out of the inspired Scriptures that Christians share with Jews, pertinent questions for Christian dialogue and relations with the followers of other religious faiths. To illustrate what I mean, let me take up one case, that of Jethro, the father-in-law of Moses.

A Midianite priest, Jethro came back on the scene after the Israelite exodus from Egypt, visited Moses in the wilderness, gave him advice on the administration of the law, and offered a sacrifice to God (Exodus 18:1–27). Although the Midianites worshipped idols, Jethro surprisingly recognized YHWH: ‘Blessed be the Lord (YHWH) who has delivered you from Egyptians and from Pharaoh. Now I know that the Lord is greater than all gods, because he delivered the people from the Egyptians’. Then Jethro ‘brought a burnt offering and sacrifices to God; and Aaron came out with the elders of Israel to eat bread with Moses’s father-in-law in the presence of God’ (vv. 11–12).

Did this priest of Midian regularly worship YHWH? (That is left unclear.) What rubrics and rules did he follow in making his cultic offering and celebrating a sacred meal with Aaron and all the elders of Israel? Or is that a hopelessly anachronistic question? At all events we meet here in the Exodus narrative, shortly before the Sinai theophany and the making of the covenant, a somewhat unexpected priestly outsider. Of course, as the father-in-law of Moses, Jethro cannot be reckoned to be simply an outsider. It was partly within the history of the chosen people that he played out his brief, ‘liminal’ role.

That said, Jethro and his priestly activity leave us with the question: could Catholics and other Christians imagine Jethro-style priests still operating on the threshold of the Church? Is there no place nowadays for a Jethro to be active, as a visiting preacher or even celebrant? Do all priestly operations depend on someone being baptized, confirmed, and ordained to the priestly ministry? Whatever else we say about the father-in-law of Moses, Jethro invites us to perform some thought experiments and imagine the reception (or non-reception) in the Church of some figure like him turning up and making his burnt offering and sacrifices to God.⁸

⁸ See J. C. Slayton, ‘Jethro’, *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 3 (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 821; E. Mendenhall, ‘Midian, Midianites’, vol.4, 315–18.

In a personal communication, Leo Lefebure reminded me recently of a section of an Egyptian wisdom work, *The Wisdom of Amenemope*, being apparently incorporated in the inspired Book of Proverbs (22:17–24:12). The Hebrew Scriptures could be enriched in this way by welcoming ‘outside’ sources, and those sources included Canaanite origins for psalms or sections of psalms.⁹ Likewise the life of the Israelites in the wilderness was briefly blessed by the presence and actions of a Midianite priest (Jethro).

Christians today include the Hebrew Scripture in their canonical Bible and draw on it constantly for their liturgy and their understanding of faith and practice. That dependence on the Jewish Bible invites them to learn from the example of the Israelites in welcoming gifts from those who follow other faiths. Through tradition the people of God drew on a variety of inspired records and interpretations of the divine self-revelation, communicated to the Israelites *and others*.

In *The Second Vatican Council on Other Religions*, apart from a few passages (e.g. viii, 32–34), I mistakenly bypassed teaching on and relationship with the Jews. This wrong judgment looks in retrospect even stranger, as five years earlier my *Salvation for All* had included much reflection on what the Old (or First) Testament Scriptures could contribute to rethinking the nature of other religions and Christian dialogue with them.¹⁰

Eduardo Echeverria

Echeverria has done me the favour of expressing at great length his evaluations of *The Second Vatican Council on Other Religions*: first, a review essay of 36 pages (listed above in n. 2), then, in the light of my response,¹¹ an article of 29 pages entitled ‘Ad Father O’Collins’.¹² After that review and article he published ‘The Salvation of Non-Christians? Reflections on Vatican II’s *Gaudium et Spes* 22, *Lumen Gentium* 16, Gerald O’Collins, SJ, and St John Paul II’, in the *Angelicum* 94 (2017), 93–142. I leave to others any assessments of this nearly fifty-page article in the *Angelicum*. Overall Echeverria’s judgment of my work amounted to far more than everything that came from the other eight reviewers put together. I hope he found doing this personally worthwhile.

⁹ See G. O’Collins, *Inspiration: Towards a Christian Theology of Biblical Inspiration* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 27, 104.

¹⁰ *Salvation for All*, 1–78, 199–206.

¹¹ O’Collins, ‘Vatican II on the Religions: A Response’, *Nova et Vetera* 15 (2017), 1243–49.

¹² *Nova et Vetera*, 15 (2017), 1251–79.

Having already published a reply to Echeverria's original essay (see n. 11), here I wish to limit myself to his second essay and raise only four points. Before doing so, let me thank him for what he chose as the brief title for his second article: 'Ad Father O'Collins'. Some readers will recall a reference to traditional titles that reach back to the Scriptures. *Ad Ebreos* could point to a collection of essays on what has been traditionally called the Letter to the Hebrews. Or in such a phrase as *Epistola S. Pauli ad Ebreos*, it would mean 'the Letter of St Paul to the Hebrews'. The use of 'ad' is not to be confused with that of 'contra', as if Echeverria wanted to write 'against' Father O'Collins.

The first issue concerns the support Echeverria claims to draw from *Lumen gentium* 16 for a pessimistic view about the proportion of human beings led astray by Satan and moving along the road to damnation. Echeverria cites the 1988 Flannery revised version of the Vatican II dogmatic constitution on the Church, *Lumen gentium*: 'but very often [*saepius* in the original!], deceived by the Evil One, men have become vain in their reasonings, have exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and served the world rather than the Creator' (no. 16).¹³ The translator should have said: 'more often', as we deal with a comparative and not a superlative in '*saepius*'. The 'more often'—and, one understands, 'than not'—of the original, Latin text is sobering enough but still less ominous than the 'very often' introduced by the translator. A mistranslation does not help the case put by Echeverria.¹⁴

Second, apropos of my account of Pope St John Paul II's teaching on Islam, which highlights the 1985 address to young Muslims in Morocco, Echeverria wanted 'a fuller and more accurate' vision of his teaching. Specifically that meant taking into account three items: the chapter on Islam in a personal work of the Pope, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope* (New York: Knopf, 1994); a Christmas address of 1986 (wrongly referenced as 1987 on p. 1270, n. 60); and the teaching of a general audience of 5 May, 1999.

What I wrote about John Paul II on Islam was based in part on a doctoral thesis by a Polish priest, Aleksander Mazur, who wrote under my direction *L'insegnamento di Giovanni Paolo II sulle altre religioni* (the teaching of John Paul II on other religions).¹⁵ Mazur's very extensive bibliography set itself to include every scrap of papal teaching on the topic from 1978 to 2000 (297–322). Mazur included a reference

¹³ A. Flannery (ed.), *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post-Conciliar Documents*, rev. edn (Northport, NY: Costello Publishing, 1988), 368. Norman P. Tanner (ed.), *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils* (Georgetown: Georgetown University Press, 1990), 861, correctly translates *saepius* as 'more often' and Walter M. Abbott and Joseph Gallagher (eds), *The Documents of Vatican II* (New York: America Press, 1966) also respect the original comparative with their translation, 'rather often' (35).

¹⁴ Echeverria, 'Ad Father O'Collins', 1273.

¹⁵ A. Mazur, *Tesi gregoriana: serie teologica* 103 (Rome: Editrice Pontificia Università Gregoriana, 2004); see my *The Second Vatican Council on Other Religions*, 168 n. 1.

to *Crossing the Threshold of Hope* (322), but rightly noted that as a personal work the Pope did not intend it as official teaching. Mazur's 26 page bibliography included what John Paul said at the audience of 5 May, 1999, and at the Christmas address of 1986, which, far from ignoring, I discussed at length (*Second Vatican Council on other Religions*, 172).

Mazur informed me very well about the reflections on Islam in the papal teaching. The outstanding document remains the 1985 address in Morocco, a landmark event in the history of the Catholic Church's relations with Islam. In *Pope John Paul II: A Reader* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2007),¹⁶ the Morocco address rightly takes up a major part (148–58) in the section on interreligious dialogue (146–67).

Third, Echeverria claims that 'objective revelation can exist without faith' (1255). The statement cries out for a distinction. Revelation, for instance, the self-disclosure of God's Son in his life, death and resurrection, can and does exist without the responding faith of this or that person. But we cannot speak of revelation objectively existing if no one at all were to accept it and live it through faith. There is a reciprocity to the very language of revelation that requires some kind of acceptance, somewhere, and by some people of what/who is revealed.

Fourth, one needs to qualify Echeverria's position that 'revelation is intended for salvation but does not necessarily entail it' (1268). The self-revelation of God does not necessarily and as such bring full and final salvation to some particular persons, but makes it possible, prepares the way for it, aims at it, and in various other ways 'entails' it, or involves it as a consequence. The very fact that God speaks to human beings is a saving gift, which can go on to produce its full effects in the risen life of heaven. If revelation is *intended* for salvation, it necessarily entails it.

Finishing this article on Christmas Eve, I became more and more aware of the richness of Vatican II's constitution on divine revelation, a document which showed repeatedly how God's self-disclosure entails the offer of salvation and *vice versa*.

I have also become more convinced than ever that I have been on the right track by, unlike my friend, Jacques Dupuis, consistently refusing any '-ism' labels to sum up my position. Thus I described my approach as a Christology of religions and never as 'inclusivism', whether broad, narrow, or whatever. Proposing the language of '-isms' is fraught with problems.

To reject, for instance, an alleged inclusivism in favour of 'accessibilism' is not without difficulties. It can mask the fact that having 'access' to some benefits (read: a national health scheme or even eternal salvation) implies being 'included' among those who enjoy

¹⁶ Ed. G. O'Collins, Daniel Kendall and Jeffrey LaBelle.

these benefits. In short, to argue accessibilism over against inclusivism, as Echeverria does, makes a supposed distinction that lacks any difference.

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