

Receptive Ecumenism and Interreligious Relations:  
What can Methodists learn from Roman Catholic Teaching on Interfaith Dialogue?

This paper investigates what Methodists might learn from magisterial Roman Catholic teaching and how this is currently interpreted and applied to interfaith dialogue with special reference to theology of religions and the salvific status of non-Christian religious traditions.<sup>1</sup> ‘Receptive ecumenism’ is never a one-way process, though the contribution of Methodism to interfaith dialogue is beyond our scope.<sup>2</sup> Leaving aside the theological and philosophical foundations of our topic (including such questions as what we mean by ‘religion’ and interreligious ‘agreement’<sup>3</sup>), and narrowing our focus to manageable proportions, we shall investigate the methods, sources and norms of theology of religions as the theological framework for interfaith dialogue from a Christian perspective.

Jacques Dupuis identifies three basic types of Christian response to religious pluralism in the light of Christianity’s claims about Jesus Christ and the means of salvation: ecclesiocentrism; Christocentrism; and theocentrism.<sup>4</sup> These differ in the theological significance they accord to the Church, Christ, and God, respectively. In ecclesiocentric theology of religions, salvation is found exclusively in the Church, so that other religions are neither salvific nor necessarily conducive to the search for God. Christocentric theology of religions affirms Christ to be the unique Saviour, whose offer of salvation is available outside the Church. Theocentric theology of religions adopts a pluralistic perspective whereby religious traditions represent authentic ways leading to God so that Christ is but one possible Saviour. As we shall see, magisterial Roman Catholic teaching falls into the category of Christocentric theology of religions.

### **The Essential Parameters of Theology of Religions**

Gavin D’Costa conveniently summarises the principal Christian responses to the fact of religious pluralism in the first centuries of the Church.<sup>5</sup> An immediate response was to affirm the necessity of faith in Christ for salvation: ‘I am the way, and the truth and the life; no one comes to the Father except through me’ (John 14.6). Furthermore, faith in Christ had an ecclesial dimension, through baptism into Christ’s body, so that membership of the Church was also necessary for salvation. Originally directed at heretics and schismatics, the formula *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* (no salvation outside the Church) can be traced to the early second century, though nowadays Roman Catholics interpret it in an inclusive way.<sup>6</sup> Another response was to acknowledge the wisdom that Christian intellectuals found in Greek philosophy. Positive theories for this suggested that God had provided knowledge in nature and in human culture which prepared people for the truth of the Gospel (*praeparatio evangelica*). Such goodness, truth and beauty as existed outside of Christianity were causally derived from God’s Word, and as seeds of the Word (*semina Verbi*) found their fulfilment in Christ. Yet another response was to posit the idea of the *limbus patrum* as a metaphorical salvific space for righteous Jews and Gentiles who had died before Christ; though it was assumed that after Christ came everyone knew the Gospel so that non-Christians must have rejected God’s truth.

These responses yielded a set of theological principles that constitute the essential parameters of Roman Catholic theology of religions, even if the question of how they relate to one another is hotly debated: (1) the necessity of Christ and his Church for salvation; (2) the justice of God toward all the righteous before Christ and (if only by inference) toward those righteous after Christ; (3) the possibility of goodness, truth and beauty in non-Christian religions, though not in any way that is equal to Christ and his sacramental presence in the Church.<sup>7</sup> To demonstrate that these parameters are consistent with the Wesleyan theological tradition and Methodist doctrinal standards (aside from ecclesiological differences) requires more space than is available here. I would argue, however, that the essential parameters of Roman Catholic theology of religions are consistent with John Wesley’s evangelical Arminianism, belief in the universal salvific will, and his idea of holy living.<sup>8</sup>

Systematically, the question arises as to how these essential parameters of Roman Catholic theology of religions can be integrated without one or another becoming obscured in the process.<sup>9</sup> But, in any case, they provide a benchmark against which to assess Christian theory and practice in relation to interfaith dialogue and the salvific status of other religions. Applied heuristically to Methodism, they invite us to reflect whether there is a tendency in certain approaches to interfaith dialogue to emphasise the presence of goodness, truth and beauty in non-Christian religions at the expense of the uniqueness of Christ and his salvation. Conversely, they invite us to consider whether some other approaches fully recognise these theological virtues in other religions.

So far as method is concerned, theology of religions is acutely influenced by the suppositions and norms that, consciously or not, inform the way in which its constituent elements are assembled, and by its intellectual and cultural setting in the academy, the church, or the mission field. While the method followed by Roman Catholic theology of religions draws on Scripture, tradition, reason and experience of the interreligious encounter, in an ecclesiastical setting the normative element in this hermeneutical matrix will be that privileged theological tradition which has acquired authoritative status in the form of dogmatic theology. In the academy, reason may be the guiding principle of a comparative methodology, whereas theology of religions developed by interfaith practitioners tends to reflect missiological or apologetic concerns arising from the encounter with other religions. The challenge for Methodists (who lean more towards practical theology) is to re-engage with the classical Christian doctrines of the Trinity, the Incarnation and salvation as the doctrinal framework in which to develop a theology of religions as the foundation for interfaith dialogue.

### **Theology of Religions in the Teaching of the Second Vatican Council**

The magisterial teaching of the Roman Catholic Church contained in the documents of the Second Vatican Council provides for the first time in the history of the Church a detailed treatment of non-Christian people and their religions. Three documents in particular are relevant here: the 'Dogmatic Constitution on the Church' (*Lumen Gentium*); 'Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions' (*Nostra Aetate*); and the 'Decree on the Mission Activity of the Church' (*Ad Gentes*).<sup>10</sup> *Lumen Gentium* carries most dogmatic weight and thus provides the basic doctrinal framework for theology of religions and interfaith dialogue. Within this framework, *Nostra Aetate* describes a pastoral orientation and approach for interfaith dialogue.

Given the essential parameters of Roman Catholic theology of religions, it is hardly surprising that what Vatican II had to say theologically about other religions should be found primarily in a teaching document on the Church. What should not be overlooked, however, is that *Lumen Gentium* considers these religions in the context of 'The People of God' and the common and universal call to salvation. Here, all human beings are said either to belong (those who believe in Christ), or else are related 'in various ways', to the People of God (*LG* §13).<sup>11</sup> Adopting a positive tone, *Lumen Gentium* recasts previous conciliar teaching in order to affirm both that the Church is 'necessary for salvation' (*LG* §14) and that non-Christians can 'attain to salvation' (*LG* §16).<sup>12</sup>

The theme of invincible ignorance is prominent in *Lumen Gentium*, along with an emphatic declaration of an absence of guilt for such ignorance, so that the only people explicitly excluded from the possibility of salvation are those who 'knowing that the Catholic Church was made necessary by Christ, would refuse to enter or to remain in it' (*LG* §14) – a category that manages to be simultaneously precise and yet masterfully vague. What exactly it means to *know* the necessity of the Church for salvation requires further study, though Roman Catholic teaching excludes the idea that anyone who has heard the Gospel, by that fact alone, has sufficient knowledge that the Catholic Church is made necessary by Christ.

In extending the possibility of salvation to those who do not know Christ and his Church, *Lumen Gentium* stops short of attributing salvific status to other religions. Under the influence of

grace, non-Christians can know and do God's will through the 'dictates of conscience' (*LG* §16), but this law of moral conscience is the only effective mediation of salvation to non-Christians. Even the idea of *praeparatio evangelica* is stated with circumspection and is applied not to other religions themselves or their structures but to 'whatever good or truth is found among' non-Christians.<sup>13</sup>

*Nostra Aetate* employs the Patristic metaphor of a 'ray of truth' to describe theologically the relationship between the truth embodied in Jesus Christ and 'whatever truth' is found among the followers of other religions.<sup>14</sup> *Ad Gentes* refers to *semina verbi latentia* – hidden seeds of the Word in other religions (*AG* §11).<sup>15</sup> The use of such metaphors is intended to relate the presence of truth, wherever it may be found, to the person of Christ, whilst preserving a qualitative distinction. The action of the incarnate Word in salvation completes the action of the eternal Word in creation. As Creator, the eternal Word has implanted a seed in human beings which naturally bears fruit that is a preparation and a divine pedagogy for the salvation that comes through the incarnate Word. The seed is 'germinated' when the Church brings the life-giving Gospel of the incarnate Word.

That non-Christians in a state of invincible ignorance may still attain to salvation through the effective mediation of the law of moral conscience is held not to compromise the unique mediation of Christ. *Lumen Gentium* affirms the necessity of Christ and the Church for salvation, though in such a way that leaves room for further study as to how this teaching might be applied to different groups. If only Roman Catholics are 'fully incorporated' into the Church (*LG* §14), other Christians are 'linked' with the Church and 'in some real way joined' with them in the Holy Spirit (*LG* §15), whilst 'those who have not yet received the Gospel are related [*ordinatur*] in various ways to the people of God' (*LG* §16). The issues this raises about the ecclesiological status of Methodism are well known and will not be pursued here.<sup>16</sup> How non-Christians who have attained salvation are related to the Church is left open, thus prompting two questions: whether and how Christ is the sole cause of saving grace; whether and how the Church is the means of salvation for those who die outside its visible boundaries. Since the Second Vatican Council, a number of magisterial teaching documents and individual theologians have addressed these questions.

### **Roman Catholic Theology of Religions since the Second Vatican Council**

The post-conciliar period in the Roman Catholic Church has been marked by an internal struggle for the normative interpretation of Council documents. Nowhere has the struggle been more evident than in theology of religions, where the Vatican has intervened in an attempt to stem a drift towards relativism and religious pluralism. The tension between maximal and minimal interpretations of the goodness, truth and beauty present in other religions lies at the heart of theological controversy.

This tension is reflected in the teaching of John Paul II, whose first encyclical, *Redemptoris Hominis* (1979), cautiously noted the action of the Holy Spirit outside the Church. In *Redemptoris Missio* 'On the Permanent Validity of the Church's Missionary Mandate' (1990), he again affirmed that the Spirit, though present in a distinctive way in the Church and its members, is present and active beyond ecclesial confines (*RM* §§19-20). This activity is not only 'in the heart of every person' (*RM* §28) but also has a social dimension: 'The Spirit's presence and activity affect not only the individuals but also society and history, peoples, cultures and religions' (*RM* §28). Moreover, 'It is the Spirit who sows the "seeds of the Word" present in various customs and cultures, preparing them for full maturity in Christ' (*RM* §28). But this affirmation of the active presence of the Holy Spirit outside the Church was not intended to attribute salvific status to other religions.

The Declaration *Dominus Iesus* 'On the Unicity and Salvific Universality of Jesus Christ and the Church' (2000) excludes just such a pluralistic interpretation of conciliar teaching.<sup>17</sup> *Dominus Iesus* states that 'it would be contrary to the faith to consider the Church as *one way* of salvation alongside those constituted by the other religions, seen as complementary to the Church or substantially equivalent to her, even if these are said to be converging with the Church towards the

eschatological kingdom of God' (*DI* §21). While non-Christian religions may contain *semeni Verbi* as a *praeparatio evangelica*, they are not themselves a means of salvation: the Christian sacraments alone are the means of grace.<sup>18</sup>

What *Dominus Iesus* says about other religions occurs in the context of statements about the nature of faith and grace. Essentially, the Declaration distinguishes between (Christian) 'theological faith', found in the sphere of supernatural grace, and 'belief in other religions' which, though also graced, belongs to the sphere of creation.<sup>19</sup> Non-Christians are not thereby excluded from saving faith, which is a gift from God and as such belongs to the supernatural realm as distinct from the 'human treasury of wisdom and religious aspiration'. This does not mean, however, that salvation can be apart from Christ or his Church.<sup>20</sup>

For those who are not formally and visibly members of the Church, 'salvation in Christ is accessible by virtue of a grace which, while having a mysterious relationship to the Church, does not make them formally part of the Church, but enlightens them in a way which is accommodated to their spiritual and material situation. This grace comes from Christ; it is the result of his sacrifice and is communicated by the Holy Spirit' [*RM* §10]; it has a relationship with the Church, which 'according to the plan of the Father, has her origin in the mission of the Son and the Holy Spirit' [*AG* §2] (*Dominus Iesus* §20).

As to how grace can be 'accommodated to their spiritual and material situation', *Dominus Iesus* invites exploration of the idea of 'participated mediation' in which other religions could be regarded as a 'participated co-operation' (*cooperatio participata*) in Christ's mediation of salvation.<sup>21</sup>

In summary, magisterial Roman Catholic teaching affirms the role of non-Christian religions in God's plan of salvation insofar as their positive elements (e.g. almsgiving and fasting) are a *praeparatio evangelica*; however, these are not in themselves a means of salvation. The reality of sin raises critical questions about elements of other religions, though this does not necessarily mean that their adherents are devoid of holiness and wisdom or that all those who die as non-Christians are excluded from any possibility of salvation. Christ's resurrection means that all those who have not heard the Gospel with complete clarity will have the opportunity to be saved – though not necessarily that all will be saved since universalism compromises human freedom to reject God. God, through Christ, is the cause of all salvation, and the Church as Christ's body on earth is the means by which saving grace is mediated. How the non-Christian is saved through Jesus Christ remains a mystery known only to God, though it happens as individuals, prompted by the presence and action of the Holy Spirit, seek to follow the dictates of their conscience and whatever goodness and truth may be present in their religious culture.

### **The WCC and Interfaith Dialogue**

Since Methodist interfaith practitioners have been active in WCC circles, it is relevant to comment on the method proposed in a recent WCC discussion document on interfaith dialogue.<sup>22</sup> 'Religious Plurality and Christian Self-Understanding' (2006) adopts 'hospitality' as a hermeneutical key and entry point for theology of religions (§26).<sup>23</sup> The grace of God in Jesus Christ 'calls us to an attitude of hospitality in our relationship with others' (§29). 'The Bible speaks of hospitality primarily as a radical openness to others based on the affirmation of the dignity of all' (§31). 'Our hospitality involves self-emptying, and in receiving others in unconditional love we participate in the pattern of God's redeeming love' (§29). 'As Christians, therefore, we need to search for the right balance between our identity in Christ and our openness to others in kenotic love that comes out of that very identity' (§29). Essentially, 'The religious traditions of humankind, in their great diversity, are "journeys" or "pilgrimages" towards human fulfilment in search for the truth about our existence' (§44). The limitations of language and human capacity in the search for truth 'make it impossible for any community to have exhausted the mystery of the salvation God offers to humankind' (§46). In all humility, Christians must say that 'salvation belongs to God, God only. We [Christians?] do not

possess salvation; we participate in it. We do not offer salvation; we witness to it; we do not decide who would be saved; we leave it to the providence of God' (§47).

Set against the benchmark of Roman Catholic theology of religions, the method envisaged by the WCC discussion document heads towards a theocentric theology of religions in which the truth claims of classical Christian soteriology are relativised. Interpreting hospitality in the Bible in terms of 'radical openness' based on human 'dignity' is ideologically laden, and as a methodology for theology of religions is narrow and tendentious. The document takes for granted what *Dominus Iesus* rejects as 'the conviction of the elusiveness and inexpressibility of divine truth, even by Christian revelation' (*DI* §4), thereby relegating Christian revelation in false humility and engendering an attenuated ecclesiology that denies the Church a mediating role in salvation.

### **Towards a Methodist Theology of Religions**

Whilst Methodists in Britain and the United States have produced worthy guidelines and resources for interfaith dialogue, theological underpinning in the form of a theology of religions has yet to be developed.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, beyond the incipient theological foundations laid by John Wesley, internal resources for producing a theology of religions are few since Methodist theologians tend to focus on defending interfaith dialogue as an aspect of mission.<sup>25</sup> Some have assumed or sought to develop a theology of religious pluralism or a Christology for a religiously pluralistic age.<sup>26</sup>

Given the impetus within Methodism for evangelism, theological reflection has also focussed on comparative methods in order to identify and develop points of contact with non-Christian religions.<sup>27</sup> Growing awareness that the proclamation of the Gospel involves a cross-cultural process of transmission has led Methodists to investigate whether Christian doctrine concerning the person of Jesus Christ might be translated into theological and philosophical categories that belong to non-Christian religious cultures, much as the earliest Christian missionaries borrowed concepts from Greek philosophy.<sup>28</sup> Frank Whaling envisages the possibility that Christian theology itself can be renewed as result of its encounter with non-Christian religions: 'Just as the dialogue with the rediscovered Aristotle enabled Aquinas to deepen his theological understanding and to recast Christian theology in the medieval situation, so too can the dialogue with Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims, Jews, and so on, in different parts of the world, enable us to deepen our theological understanding and to recast some of our theological ideas in the modern situation'.<sup>29</sup>

The assumption here is that the content of the Gospel can be detached from the form in which it was articulated as a result of Christianity's encounter with Greek philosophy in the first Christian centuries. In his encyclical, *Fides et Ratio* (1998), John Paul II endorses the inculcation of the Gospel in the 'rich heritage' of other religious traditions, but warns that 'the Church cannot abandon what she has gained from her inculcation in the world of Greco-Roman thought. To reject this heritage would be to deny the providential plan of God who guides his Church down the paths of time and history' (§72). The tension between the conservative dynamic of the Roman Catholic Church and the progressive dynamic of Methodism highlights the need for intra-Christian dialogue about method, sources and norms in theology of religions.

Following the trend in WCC circles, Methodist interfaith practitioners have been influenced by the concept of *missio Dei* – 'God's own salvific mission in the world, even preceding human witness, in which we are in Christ called to participate' – allied to a renewed emphasis on the presence and action of the eternal Word and the Holy Spirit in creation.<sup>30</sup> Thus Kenneth Cracknell proposes a 'Word/Spirit/Logos Christology' for religious pluralism based on the universal presence of Christ who fills all things (Ephesians 4.7-10).<sup>31</sup> Accordingly, 'To the straightforward question, "Where is Christ now?" the answer is "here, and everywhere". To the proposition that we should take Christ to heathen lands, the only response can be that we go to meet him there', for which task

Christians require a missiology of religious pluralism in which the destiny of the universe is to become the Church in its fullness (Ephesians 1.21-22).<sup>32</sup>

Certainly, Christ is present to his people in various ways – through the sacraments, when two or three gather in his name (Matthew 18.20), in the poor (Matthew 25.31-46) – but differences in the mode of his presence and our knowing must also be taken into account. In what sense is Christ ‘present’ in other religions such that the task of Christian mission is to ‘meet him there’? Cracknell draws on the Patristic idea of *semeni Verbi* but neglects the metaphysical distinction that magisterial Roman Catholic teaching makes between the eternal Word and ‘seeds of the Word’, which only come to fruition through the economy of salvation. An emphasis on the universal presence of Christ suggests that the only difference between Christians and non-Christians is that the former ‘see’ and acknowledge the presence of Christ in their midst, whereas the latter do not.

The Trinitarian shape of the divine economy is crucial to a correct understanding of the action of Word and Spirit in the world. In the divine economy, the Incarnation and Pentecost have greater significance than is conveyed by an emphasis on the universal presence of the Word and Spirit in creation. *Dominus Iesus* notes the tendency in some accounts of the divine economy to compromise ‘the personal unity between the Eternal Word and Jesus of Nazareth’ and ‘the unity of the economy of the Incarnate Word and the Holy Spirit’ (*DI* §4). It regrets ‘the difficulty in understanding and accepting the presence of definitive and eschatological events in history’ and ‘the metaphysical emptying of the historical incarnation of the Eternal Logos, reduced to a mere appearing of God in history’ (*DI* §4). This is not to suggest that *Dominus Iesus* must have the final word, but to invite Methodist theologians to engage more closely with magisterial Roman Catholic teaching.

Finally, the influence of Wilfred Cantwell Smith on Methodist interfaith practitioners requires comment because of its methodological implications.<sup>33</sup> ‘Like Buber before him, Smith affirmed that the distinctive quality of the human being was *faith* rather than a cognitive assent to a particular set of beliefs, and that therefore dialogue was from faith to faith, or in Buber’s expression from “one open-hearted person to another open-hearted person”.’<sup>34</sup> ‘Because faith is this primary constitutive human reality, we meet other persons primarily as people of faith and not primarily as Hindus and Buddhists, Muslims or Jews.’<sup>35</sup> But separating ‘the faith by which we believe’ from ‘the faith that is believed’ is not a valid starting point in Roman Catholic theological method because it leads to a form of Christianity devoid of doctrinal content.<sup>36</sup> Securing agreement in the method, sources and norms of theology of religions would be a useful objective in ecumenical dialogue.

## Conclusion

Given the global fact of religious pluralism and the collapse of Christendom as a viable theological concept, the pastoral orientation of interfaith dialogue is one of the most positive developments in interreligious relations in recent years. But interfaith dialogue requires a doctrinal context in the form of theology of religions if it is to address questions of truth in any meaningful way. For the foreseeable future, Christian theology of religions seems likely to be characterised by the tension (crossing confessional boundaries) between maximal and minimal interpretations of the goodness, truth and beauty in other religions and how these relate to Christ.<sup>37</sup>

In a spirit of receptive ecumenism, this paper has tried to show how Methodists can benefit from engaging with magisterial Roman Catholic teaching as they seek to develop a theology of religions that is faithful to the Wesleyan theological tradition. This does not foreclose debate, since the tensions that arise in striving to be faithful to the full contours of the Scriptural witness are reflected both in Roman Catholic teaching itself and in the continuing debate over its interpretation.

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<sup>1</sup> The sources of magisterial Roman Catholic teaching cited in this paper are the documents of the Second Vatican Council, several post-conciliar encyclicals and the ‘Declaration’ *Dominus Iesus* by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. For a discussion of the different levels of authority within the Roman Catholic Magisterium see Avery Dulles, *Magisterium: Teacher and Guardian of the Faith* (Naples, Florida: Sapientia Press, 2007).

<sup>2</sup> On ‘receptive ecumenism’, see Paul D. Murray (ed.), *Receptive Ecumenism and the Call to Catholic Learning: Exploring a Way for Contemporary Ecumenism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); David M. Chapman, ‘A Methodist Perspective on Catholic Learning’, in Murray, *Receptive Ecumenism*, pp. 134-48. For an introductory survey of the Methodist contribution to interfaith dialogue, see Kenneth Cracknell and Susan J. White, *An Introduction to World Methodism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 257-63.

<sup>3</sup> Interfaith dialogue has yet to pay sufficient attention to the theological and philosophical problems involved in using religious language univocally across different universes of discourse. See my article, ‘Consensus and Difference: The Nature of Ecumenical Agreement’, in *Ecclesiology* 8/1 (2012), pp. 54-70 for a short discussion of the problem in relation to intra-Christian dialogue.

<sup>4</sup> Jacques Dupuis, *Towards a Christian Theology of Pluralism* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1997), pp. 185-92. For a survey of the various approaches to theology of religions, see Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *An Introduction to the Theology of Religions: Biblical, Historical and Contemporary Perspectives* (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 2003).

<sup>5</sup> See Gavin D’Costa, ‘Catholicism and the World Religions: A Theological and Phenomenological Account’, in Gavin D’Costa (ed.), *The Catholic Church and the World Religions: A Theological and Phenomenological Account* (London: T&T Clark, 2011), pp. 1-33.

<sup>6</sup> For a discussion of this axiom see Francis A. Sullivan, *Salvation Outside the Church? Tracing the History of the Catholic Response* (New York: Paulist Press, 1992).

<sup>7</sup> D’Costa, ‘Catholicism and the World Religions’, p. 3.

<sup>8</sup> On John Wesley’s theology of religions, see Randy Maddox, ‘Wesley and the Question of Truth or Salvation through other Religions’, *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 27 (1992), pp. 7-29; Rebekah L. Miles, ‘John Wesley as Interreligious Resource’, in Martin Forward, Stephen Plant and Susan White (eds), *A Great Commission: Christian Hope and Religious Diversity* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2000), pp. 61-75.

<sup>9</sup> Possible foundations are ‘salvation history’ (H.R. Schlette) or ‘transcendental anthropology’ (Karl Rahner). See H.R. Schlette, *Towards a Theology of Religions* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1966); Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity* (London; Darton, Longman and Todd, 1978).

<sup>10</sup> The text of these documents and the other magisterial teaching documents cited in this paper is available in English on the Vatican website [www.vatican.va](http://www.vatican.va) from which all quotations are taken.

<sup>11</sup> ‘All men are called to be part of this catholic unity of the people of God which in promoting universal peace presages it. And there belong to or are related to it in various ways, the Catholic faithful, all who believe in Christ, and indeed the whole of mankind, for all men are called by the grace of God to salvation’ (*LG* §13).

<sup>12</sup> The key sections in full are as follows:

‘Basing itself upon Sacred Scripture and Tradition, [this Sacred Council] teaches that the Church, now sojourning on earth as an exile, is necessary for salvation. Christ, present to us in His Body, which is the Church, is the one Mediator and the unique way of salvation. In explicit terms He Himself affirmed the necessity of faith and baptism (cf. Mark 16.16; John 3.5) and thereby affirmed also the necessity of the Church, for through baptism as through a door men enter the Church. Whosoever, therefore, knowing that the Catholic Church was made necessary by Christ, would refuse to enter or to remain in it, could not be saved’ (*LG* §14);

‘Those also can attain to salvation who through no fault of their own do not know the Gospel of Christ or His Church, yet sincerely seek God and moved by grace strive by their deeds to do His

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will as it is known to them through the dictates of conscience. Nor does Divine Providence deny the helps necessary for salvation to those who, without blame on their part, have not yet arrived at an explicit knowledge of God and with His grace strive to live a good life. Whatever good or truth is found amongst them is looked upon by the Church as a preparation for the Gospel' (*LG* §16).

<sup>13</sup> This is stated in *LG* §16 and *AG* §3, and implied in *LG* §17; *AG* §9 and *NA* §9. The subtlety of the formula 'whatever good or truth' (*quidquid boni* and *quidquid veritatis*) concedes the possibility that such things may be found among non-Christians, but does not affirm that they are. For a discussion, see Karl J. Becker and Ilaria Morali (eds), *Catholic Engagement with World Religions: A Comprehensive Study* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 2010), pp. 130-2.

<sup>14</sup> 'The Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in these religions. She regards with sincere reverence those ways of conduct and of life, those precepts and teachings which, though differing in many aspects from the ones she holds and sets forth, nonetheless often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men' (*NA* §2).

<sup>15</sup> *Lumen Gentium* refers to *quidquid boni ...seminatum invenitur* or hidden seeds, infelicitously rendered into English as 'whatever good is in the minds and hearts of men, whatever good lies latent in the religious practices and cultures of diverse peoples' (*LG* §17).

<sup>16</sup> The Joint Commission for Dialogue between the World Methodist Council and the Roman Catholic Church has produced three reports so far on ecclesiology: *Towards a Statement on the Church* (Nairobi, 1986); *The Grace Given You in Christ: Catholics and Methodists Reflect Further on the Church* (Seoul, 2006); *Encountering Christ the Saviour: Church and Sacraments* (Durban, 2011). The text of these reports can also be found on the Vatican website.

<sup>17</sup> The authority of this text requires comment. Though not a papal encyclical but a 'Declaration' by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, it was approved by the Pope 'in a special way'. John Paul II *Angelus* Remarks, 1 October 2000; cited in Becker and Morali, *Catholic Engagement with World Religions*, p. 137, footnote 80.

<sup>18</sup> 'Certainly, the various religious traditions contain and offer religious elements which come from God, and which are part of what "the Spirit brings about in human hearts and in the history of peoples, in cultures, and religions" [*RM* §29]. Indeed, some prayers and rituals of the other religions may assume a role of preparation for the Gospel, in that they are occasions or pedagogical helps in which the human heart is prompted to be open to the action of God. One cannot attribute to these, however, a divine origin or an *ex opere operato* salvific efficacy, which is proper to the Christian sacraments. Furthermore, it cannot be overlooked that other rituals, insofar as they depend on superstitions or other errors (cf. *1 Cor* 10:20-21), constitute an obstacle to salvation' (*DI* §21).

<sup>19</sup> 'Faith is first of all a personal adherence of man to God. At the same time, and inseparably, it is a *free assent to the whole truth that God has revealed*' [*Catechism of the Catholic Church* §150]. Faith, therefore, as '*a gift of God*' and as '*a supernatural virtue infused by him*' [*ibid* §153], involves a dual adherence: to God who reveals and to the truth which he reveals, out of the trust which one has in him who speaks.

If faith is the acceptance in grace of revealed truth, which "makes it possible to penetrate the mystery in a way that allows us to understand it coherently", [*Fides et ratio*, §13] then belief, in the other religions, is that sum of experience and thought that constitutes the human treasury of wisdom and religious aspiration, which man in his search for truth has conceived and acted upon in his relationship to God and the Absolute. [Cf. *ibid.*, 31-32'] (*Dominus Iesus* §7).

<sup>20</sup> 'The Church is the "universal sacrament of salvation", [*LG* §48] since, united always in a mysterious way to the Saviour Jesus Christ, her Head, and subordinated to him, she has, in God's plan, an indispensable relationship with the salvation of every human being. [Cf. St Cyprian, *De catholicae ecclesiae unitate*, 6: *CCSL* 3, 253-254; St Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses*, III, 24, 1: *SC* 211, 472-474'] (*Dominus Iesus* §20).

<sup>21</sup> 'The Second Vatican Council, in fact, has stated that: "the unique mediation of the Redeemer does not exclude, but rather gives rise to a manifold cooperation which is but a participation in this one source" [*LG* §62]. The content of this participated mediation should be explored more deeply, but must

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remain always consistent with the principle of Christ's unique mediation: "Although participated forms of mediation of different kinds and degrees are not excluded, they acquire meaning and value *only* from Christ's own mediation, and they cannot be understood as parallel or complementary to his" [RM §5]. Hence, those solutions that propose a salvific action of God beyond the unique mediation of Christ would be contrary to Christian and Catholic faith' (DI §14). The idea of 'participated mediation' in *LG* §62 is applied to the role of Mary in the economy of salvation. However, since Mary occupies a unique position in salvation history as *Theotokos*, it is far from obvious how a term applied to her might also apply to non-Christian religions, even if there are 'different kinds and degrees'.

<sup>22</sup> On the Methodist influence within the WCC Office of Interreligious Relations, see Cracknell and White, *An Introduction to World Methodism*, p. 259.

<sup>23</sup> The discussion document can be found on the WCC website ([www.oikumene.org](http://www.oikumene.org)).

<sup>24</sup> *Faith Meeting Faith: Ways Forward in Inter-faith Relations* (British Methodist Conference, 2003); *Interfaith Relations: Exploring Principles and Practice Guidelines for the Methodist People* (British Conference, 2004); *Guidelines for Interfaith Dialogue* (General Commission on Christian Unity and Interreligious Concerns, 2001); *Called to be Neighbors and Witnesses: Guidelines for Interreligious Relationships* (General Conference, 2004); *Wesleyan/Methodist Witness in Christian and Islamic Cultures* (World Methodist Council, 2004); Peter D. Bishop, *The Christian and people of other faiths* (Peterborough: Epworth, 1997);

<sup>25</sup> For example, Kenneth Cracknell, *Towards a New Relationship: Christians and People of Other Faith* (London: Epworth, 1986); Martin Forward, *Interreligious Dialogue: A Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2001).

<sup>26</sup> Nehemiah Thompson, 'The Search for a Methodist Theology of Religious Pluralism', in S. Mark Heim (ed.), *Grounds for Understanding: ecumenical resources for responses to religious pluralism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), pp. 93-106; John B. Cobb, *Christ in a Pluralistic Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1975); Kenneth Cracknell, *In Good and Generous Faith: Christian Responses to Religious Pluralism* (Peterborough: Epworth, 2005); Diana Eck, *Encountering God: A Spiritual Journey from Bozeman to Banaras* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993); David L. Watson, *God does not foreclose: the Universal Promise of Redemption* (Nashville, Abingdon, 1990); Martin Forward, *The nature and the name of love: Religion for the contemporary world* (Peterborough: Epworth, 2008); Jerry Walls, *The Problem of Pluralism: Recovering United Methodist Identity* (Wilmore, Good news, 1986).

<sup>27</sup> For example, Geoffrey Parrinder, *Avatar and Incarnation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982); Peter K. H. Lee, *Confucian-Christian encounters in historical and contemporary perspective* (Lewiston, New York: Mellen Press, 1992).

<sup>28</sup> See Andrew F. Walls, *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2002).

<sup>29</sup> Frank Whaling, *Christian Theology and World Religions: A Global Approach* (London: Marshall Pickering, 1986), p. 94.

<sup>30</sup> 'Religious Plurality and Christian Self-Understanding' (WCC, 2006), §20.

<sup>31</sup> Kenneth Cracknell, *In Good and Generous Faith: Christian Responses to Religious Pluralism* (Peterborough: Epworth, 2005), Chapter 2.

<sup>32</sup> Cracknell, *In Good and Generous Faith*, p. 46.

<sup>33</sup> Cracknell and White, *An Introduction to World Methodism*, acknowledge the influence of Smith as 'perhaps the greatest theorist of interfaith understanding of the last century' (p. 259).

<sup>34</sup> Cracknell, *In Good and Generous Faith*, p. 104.

<sup>35</sup> Cracknell, *In Good and Generous Faith*, p. 105.

<sup>36</sup> As noted in *Dominus Iesus* §7 (see note 20 above). Also, Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Towards a World Theology* (London: Macmillan, 1981); for a critique, see Whaling, *Christian Theology and World Religions*.

<sup>37</sup> I suggest avenues for research in theology of religions in, 'Methodism, Ecumenism and Interfaith Relations', in William Gibson, Peter Forsaith, Martin Wellings (eds), *The Ashgate Research Companion to World Methodism* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2013), pp. 121-40.