Commentary on the documents *Nostra aetate* and *Lumen gentium*[7]

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By including this translated section of the doctoral thesis of the late Prof. Piet van der Merwe, the Editor gives recognition to the contribution made by him to formulating a theology of religions. In this section, from his dissertation he discusses how Vatican II contributed to the understanding of religion and human nature. It also paved the way for determining a particular theology of religions still evident in Roman Catholic circles today. In this chapter, the main documents contributing to formulation of this theology of religions, *Nostra aetate* and *Lumen gentium,* are discussed. Through analysing these documents it becomes apparent that the Roman Catholic theology of religions is grounded in an understanding of the unity of humankind. This unity is based on, (1) unity as an empirical fact, (2) unity as a result of God's providence and (3) unity as a result of

7. Translation of a section of the dissertation by Prof. Piet van der Merwe, 'Die Godsdienste by Vaticanum II' (Religions at Vatican II), 1977, presented in part compliance with the requirements for the degree DD under the supervision of Prof. F.J. van Zyl at the University of Pretoria. This section of the dissertation is presented posthumously.

humankind's search for truth. This provides guidelines on how to think about the existence of other religions and the relationship between these religions.

▋Introduction

The history and development of *Nostra aetate* and *Lumen gentium* indicate that it never was the intention of Vatican II to create a theology of religions. This idea developed gradually and was influenced by different aspects. Eventually, the theology of religions that did arise was, like all matters, discussed in conciliar documents: the result of church-political compromises within the framework of churchly doctrine. Much more was at risk than theological considerations, which is why a theology of religions was more or less developed.

To do justice to a document such as *Nostra aetate* would be to evaluate it not only from a religious-theological perspective but within the framework of the total intention of the Council. The intention of this study is not to evaluate the success of the Second Vatican Council but to consider the aspect of the theology of religions. Therefore, *Nostra aetate* is only evaluated as religious-theological declaration.

Willem Adolph Visser't Hooft, former general secretary of the WCC, called *Nostra aetate* a disappointing document without much content, terming it not much more than a couple of courteous remarks about non-Christian religions (see Littell 1975:63–64). With this he expressed the views of many within and outside of the Roman Catholic Church and Christianity. There was so much the Council could have said, and still there was no answer as to whether it truly had any value to speak so little on such a complex issue. It can also not be denied that the Roman Catholic Church remained one of the few churches to issue an official declaration and to document the church's relation with non-Christian religions, and to still officially engage with the world of non-Christian religions surrounding Christianity.

The most important document pertaining to non-Christian religions is the declaration of the church on non-Christian religions, *Nostra aetate*. It is not a very long document as it was decided that the issue should be addressed in a short declaration. The feeling was probably that the matter arose unexpectedly, and that it refers to quite a new discipline. It was therefore deemed appropriate to mention only a few principles, and to assign the remainder to the future. Whilst such an argument is understandable, the result was that more questions arose than were answered. The sketchy way in which the matter was addressed opened up the opportunity for a multitude of interpretations and assumptions which do not always concur but seemingly deserve the right to exist. The advantage was that a lively debate ensued, and that the discipline of theology of religions received a huge impetus.

In the commentary made here and discussion following on it, the scheme of *Nostra aetate* is outlined.

■ The goal of the Council in discussing non-Christian religions

One of the main reasons that the Vatican II speaks about the church's position on non-Christian religions is suggested by *Nostra aetate* as a pastoral conversation. Pope John XXIII intended this Council to be a pastoral council. The attitude reflected in the opening words '*Nostra aetate*', is a topic that arose frequently in the discussions of the Council goers. No other council in the history of the Roman Catholic Church was as aware of the world outside the church. It also reflected the attitude that Pope John XXIII projected onto the Council. The church had to awake from the stagnation which its traditional monastic introversion brought about. Windows towards the outside world had to be opened. '*Aggiornamento*' meant that the church had to be brought up to date so that it could play its role in the world in the current time. In '*Nostra aetate*' we hear an echo of the rallying call '*aggiornamento*'.

Nostra aetate also expresses the changed outlook of the Roman Catholic Church towards the secularised world. After the destruction of the Corpus Christianum it was as if Rome retracted into a monastery. The church with these opening words and especially with a document like this, wanted to declare the pastoral constitution of the church in the modern world (*Gaudium et spes*) – that the time has passed for the church to concur with rulers for worldly power, or that the church distances itself through doom prophets from the world. The church acknowledges the existence of an autonomous, secularised world (Stransky 1966:342) and by implication, wants to deny that the current era we live in is weaker than the previous.

The opening words also speak of the openness of the church. The church does not want to dictate without listening, but wants to listen. The church wants to thoroughly comprehend the factual situation of the world and let these facts determine its decisions. It is therefore a prophetic relation with the world where the church wants to act as interpreting prophet.

Karl Barth was, however, of the opinion that in spite of its good intentions the Council did not accomplish a prophetic and thorough handling of the modern issues in the world. For example, he finds *Gaudium et spes* on this matter too superficial and sketchy (Barth 1969:28). It is a question whether Roman Catholicism with its current approach to religiosity and reality is capable of addressing the occurrence of secularisation in its fullest consequence (Barth 1969:206).

Lumen gentium 16 fits into a totally different context. This document is not meant for a public reader outside the church, but for the church itself. Therefore, this document is written in a more introverted style. Even where it refers to non-Christians, the frame of reference is still the church. Article 16 is the last section of a subsection which

addresses the catholicity of the church and that is included; Article 14 deals with the formal members of the Roman Catholic Church and Article 15 with non-Roman Christianity.

The second sentence of *Nostra aetate* states the grounding of the church's declaration on its attitude towards non-Christian religions, and also describes the purpose of the document. This sentence was added late in the development of the document, based on some Council members expressing their concern that the document might just be an expression of some nice thoughts on non-Christian religions (Neuner 1968:45). The document is presented as being born from the task of the Church to improve unity and love amongst people, with the purpose to build bridges and increase agreement. At least two issues are important, namely, (1) the declaration is not grounded in the creation of the Church and (2) the declaration is not meant to contain issues of essential meaning in the relationship between the Church and non-Christian religiosity.

1. The fact that the declaration is grounded in the task of the Church to improve unity and love amongst all people, means that it is not connected to the essential task of the Church, and therefore will also not be concerned with matters essential to the Church. The document does not result from a serious consideration of the gospel which ought to be declared to all people and nations, but is based on unity and love (The nature of the unity and love is not clearly defined). There is an argument to be made that *Nostra aetate* is not only a theology of religions but in fact also a conversation with non-Christians, addressing not only Church members but non-Christian readers as well. It would not have been wise to address non-Christians as perceived by the Church as objects of mission. Still, we might feel that the Church could have said more on its own understanding of its existence within the world of religions. As formulated here it creates the impression that the declaration represents an anthropological position and is based on a common anthropological element.

2. The declaration is not willing to address issues which, according to the Church, are of essential meaning to the relationship between the church and non-Christian religions; for example, it does not address the salvific position of non-Christian religions. In fact, the declaration says nothing about salvation. It also does not address the bigger basic and structural issues which separate the church and non-Christian religions. However, it addresses that which humankind has in common and which leads to unity – thus the communalities between the church and non-Christian religions. It appears as if the theology of religions and the interreligious conversation of which the declaration is a representation as an example, is based on the same '*elementa*' doctrine formulated in the *Unitatis redintegratio,* on which the connection between the church and piety outside of the church is made based on

certain communal elements or values. Such an approach needs to be thoroughly evaluated.[8] We therefore stand with the statement that the communalities between religions is much more complex than the declaration proposes (Neuner 1968:47). Religious phenomena carrying the same meaning in different religious contexts are indeed very rare. Points of contact, on the other hand tend to end up as points of difference. Interreligious conversation is much more than compiling a list of communalities.

The way in which *Nostra aetate* is grounded and the purpose announced for it differs hugely from *Lumen gentium* 16. *Nostra aetate* is concerned with the church's treatment of non-Christian religions; *Lumen gentium* is concerned with the relation between non-Christians and the Church, more specifically with the possibility of salvation for those belonging to non-Christian religions and also atheists. There are two indications that *Lumen gentium* 16 has more meaning for the Church than *Nostra aetate*, (1) in *Lumen gentium* 16 the focus is on the Church and the gift of salvation, which is a promise to the Church and (2) where *Nostra aetate* is expressing an attitude, *Lumen gentium* 16 is concerned with a relationship with specific content and meaning. The possibility of salvation outside of the formal borders of the Church is connected to a specific relation between the Church and the non-Christian pious. The Council did not denounce the statement made by Cyprian, '*extra ecclesiam nulla salus*', but extended its understanding of Church to such a degree that it can now be claimed that the Church of Rome exists in an invisible form even outside of the formal borders of the Church. Three forms of affiliation to the church can be identified: membership, initiation and 'focused on'. Membership is the privilege of formal members; initiated refers to how non-Roman Christians relate to the Church of Rome; whilst 'focused on' refers to non-Christians. The matter of churchly affiliation of the non-Christians needs more elaboration.[9]

A further difference between the two documents is their purpose: *Nostra aetate* is concerned with non-Christian religions, whilst *Lumen gentium* 16 is concerned with the adherents of those religions. *Lumen gentium* thus addresses non-Christians on an individual level. The implications of this are addressed in a later section.[10]

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8. The following chapter of the dissertation does provide such an evaluation, which is not presented here due to lack of space.

9. Due to space restriction it is not discussed here.

10. Due to space restriction it is not discussed here.

■ The unity of humankind as background to religions

The declaration starts off with the remark that the most prominent characteristic of the modern time is the increasing unification of humankind and nations. This section is one of the last parts to be added to the declaration. When the declaration was extended to include the complete non-Christian world, this section was added to place religions within the framework of humankind (Neuner 1968:43) and to indicate that this document does not address religions as phenomenal entities (as science of religion might do), but as a matter which humans are concerned with. Humans are presented as co-carriers of human fate and are therefore bound in unity.

The unity of humankind is presented in three paragraphs, each with a distinct argument, namely (1) the unity of humankind as empirical fact in the modern world, (2) the unity is based on God as Creator and end goal of humankind and (3) this unity is also based on the one human search for the great truths of life.

■ The unity of humankind as empirical fact

The declaration starts with an argument that the modern context made humankind aware of unity. No one and no nation can exist in isolation any longer. Communication and transport connects everybody, and the wide world has been reduced to one planet. Further, the economic, social and political aspects of the world have become so complex that one can no longer exist without the other. Everyone and each nation not only has to take its direct neighbour into consideration but in fact the whole world, whether we like it or not.

Hans Küng reckons that the Roman Catholic Church's way of thinking about non-Christian cultures and religions has been influenced by an awareness of the modern situation in the following way:

1. The current proximity of nations, cultures and religions dismissed ignorance and misinformation. Knowledge brought understanding and destroyed previously held misconceptions and biases.
2. The church came to the shocking realisation that the Western culture and religious environment does not hold a monopoly on morality and spiritual superiority. Many non-Christian cultures became known to the West through their moral and spiritual values – often in opposition to the moral decay and regression characterising Western communities. The question begs to be asked: Can the religions according to which these cultures and nations live be so terribly evil and wrong when the fruits they produce compare favourably with those of the church?
3. There was also the revealing awareness that the Christian statistical position in the world no longer seemed positive and continues to diminish. The church continues to

resemble a minority group in history. Of all the people who lived on earth, the majority never belonged to Christianity.

Küng asks the question whether the church can be so arrogant to think that Christianity, and more specifically the Roman Catholic Church, which represents such a small percentage of humanity through all the centuries until today, can be the unique vessel of salvation. The problem becomes bigger when the future is taken into account (Küng 1967:27).

Against the revealing awareness Küng described, calm progress was made by science of religion gradually and scientifically dissecting the non-Christian religions to which theologians made a substantial contribution. It became evident that at some stage the church had to take notice of the non-Christian religions and declare its relation to them in a theology of religions – rather than a negative sidelining of non-Christian religions and labelling them as the work of the Devil, as in the past.

Unity as a result of God's providence

In the following two sentences *Nostra aetate* discusses the unity of humankind as the result of God's creation, his providence and his one goal which he intended for everyone. It is noteworthy that at this point the document talks about 'nations' (*gentes*) instead of 'people', to which paragraph one refers. The document therefore also wants to highlight this aspect: That the role of the existence of nations in history cannot be ignored. Thus, the document moves from the individualistic approach to a collective perspective, to come to a treatment of collective religions and not only individual spirituality. This collective perspective is related to the unity of humankind. The history of humankind is not a string of isolated and haphazard events, but a continuous process where the one human race moves from its origin towards its eventual destination (Neuner 1968:46).

The historical perspective applied here is not that of general history, but that of salvation history. All people and nations are somehow concerned with the salvation history, even if they have not yet heard the biblical message, because they have one common origin and one common destination. Even the diversity and dispersing of humankind cannot destroy the unity, since this can also be traced back to the one God who intended it. It can even be suggested that the doctrine of cosmic salvation history is at play here.

In spite of the biblical references which *Nostra aetate* uses to substantiate the arguments made, this section does not mention God in terms of his revelation in Jesus Christ. To tell the truth, Christ is only mentioned later on in the document. The understanding is that it starts off with a general teaching of God. Perhaps this is a way in which the document refers to those elements that humans have in common. To be honest, Paul's speech on the Aeropagus did not start much differently.

In the first section an important element comes to the fore in a most subtle way: God's salvific plan is stretched out towards all. The unity of humankind also includes God's intention to save all humans.

Lumen gentium 16 states it more directly: God is not far from anyone who seeks him in shadows and images, because it is he who gives life, breath and all else and he is the Saviour who wants to save all humans.

The doctrine of God's universal salvation is one of the cornerstones of the theology of religions of Vatican II. God wants to save all, so it must be assumed that he will construe ways to save all. The Roman Catholic Church declared at Vatican II that religiosity is a phenomenon directly related to God's salvific plan for humankind. This statement will need some consideration.[11]

Many Protestant theologians do not interpret the universal salvific plan of God through Christ in a literal sense – especially not in a way that implies the automatic application of salvation to all humans. The act of salvation of Jesus carries universal implications, meaning he is far more than a Jewish Messiah. His message is meant for all people and his gift of salvation is intended for the whole of humankind – to be accepted or rejected. The salvation through Jesus cannot be attained without the acceptance of his message (König 1973:93).

Unity as the result of the human search for truth

In the next section a discussion of the abstract human nature follows. The trend in this part is philosophical-phenomenological. There is thus a deviation from the factual approach in the first and the semi-hermeneutical approach in the second paragraph. In this paragraph an investigation is made into the most basic correspondence in the human religious search for reality and truth. It comes as no surprise that this approach is utilised as the Bible never presents humans as religious beings or addresses the phenomenon of religion. Whosoever wants to investigate this matter must follow a phenomenological approach. An analogical case is the way in which Calvin starts his *Institution*. He decided to start with humans as religious beings and the phenomenon of religion, but was dependant on references from classical wisdom and not, as is the case in the rest of his work, on biblical references.

If the Council earlier, by implication, was of the opinion that the church should take the modern world and the constitutive elements thereof seriously, it here wants to identify the religions and their influence as one of the main elements. The Council

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11. In a later section of the chapter this matter is discussed in more detail. So is the universal salvation implied in the religious-theological approach of Vatican II.

expresses the opinion that although ideologies today are an important factor in the current world situation, it still are religions which determine human existence.

The unity of humans as religious beings lies not in the answers they produce but in the questions they ask. The general impression when surveying the world of religions is the multitude of different doctrines, systems, customs, rites, et cetera. However, one is overwhelmed by the one factor lying at the root of all – the way in which humans experience themselves and their existence (Neuner 1968:47). The document asks by implication whether it is not possible in an interreligious conversation to start with the questions rather than with the answers. This should not be confused with an academic conversation, but is an existential matter. That is the reason why academic terms such as 'problem' were avoided and words like 'mystery' and 'secret' were used ('*aenigmata*') (Neuner 1968:48).

The most basic question is 'What is human?' Then questions follow in sequence of general importance. The document does not address these questions in detail but suggests a guideline for future dialogue. The advantage of this approach is that non-Christians are reminded that Christianity is no less the result of a serious consideration of these questions than their own religions or philosophies are. The same reminder applies to Christianity. The message between the lines is that each religion deserves to be treated with respect and taken seriously since it is the expression of the deepest concerns and sentiments of its adherents. Non-Christians also receive the assurance that the Roman Catholic Church respects their religion as an expression of their deepest being, and this awareness will be reflected in their treatment by the Roman Catholic Church.

■ Summary: Chapter 2

In the second chapter, an overview of the development of the discipline of theology of religions within the Roman Catholic tradition is presented. This section consists of a translation of a section of the doctoral thesis of the late Prof. P.J. van der Merwe. In this particular section selected from his dissertation, Van der Merwe discusses how Vatican II contributed to the understanding of religion and human nature. It also paved the way for determining a particular theology of religions still evident in Roman Catholic circles today. In this chapter, the main documents contributing to the formulation of the theology of religions, *Nostra aetate* and *Lumen gentium* are discussed. Van der Merwe presents a thorough translation of these documents in his dissertation. Here only his discussion of these documents is presented. Through analysing these documents, it becomes apparent that the Roman Catholic theology of religions is grounded in an understanding of the unity of humankind. This unity is based on, (1) unity as an empirical fact, (2) unity as the result of God's providence and (3) unity as a result of humankind's search for the truth. This analysis provides guidelines on how to think about the existence of other religions and the relationship between these religions.

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