

Vatican II on the Religions: A Response

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IN A RECENT REVIEW ESSAY on my *The Second Vatican Council on Other Religions*,¹ Eduardo Echeverria took issue with me on many points.² Let me choose eleven of his objections, treat them in the order in which they appear in his article, and refer intratextually to what he wrote.

First, Echeverria challenged my position that, when human beings accept God's revelation, they receive something that sets them on the way of salvation (839–40). Pace Echeverria, revelation and salvation may be distinguishable, but they are not separable, as years ago Juan Alfaro used to insist when citing the Johannine language of Christ being our Light (revelation) and, hence, simultaneously our Life (salvation). Joseph Ratzinger also prompted me into taking up this position. His study of St Bonaventure's concept of revelation allowed him to retrieve the notion that divine revelation is actualized in its outcome, human faith. God's self-revelation exists in living subjects, those who respond with faith. In a lecture given in 1963, Ratzinger insisted that "revelation always and only becomes a reality where there is faith. . . . Revelation to some degree includes its recipient, without whom it does not exist."³ Receiving in faith the offer of

¹ Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013.

² "Vatican II and the Religions: A Review Essay," *Nova et Vetera* 13, no. 3 (2015): 837–73. This article will be cited in my present text and notes simply by page numbers in parentheses.

³ Joseph Ratzinger, "Revelation and Tradition," in Karl Rahner and Joseph Ratzinger, *Revelation and Tradition*, trans. W.J. O'Hara (London: Burns & Oates, 1966), 26–49, at 36.

divine self-revelation is a saving grace, which sets believers on the way of salvation.

Later on, Echeverria remarks that, by associating revelation and salvation, I probably mean “that the purpose of revelation is salvific.” He adds at once: “If so, I think we must say that this salvific purpose is *not* always realized.” Yes, I do agree that “an individual must respond in faith to God’s self-revelation in order to receive salvation” (855), and—I would add—must continue responding with such faith. But we do not know how many people, either Christians or those of other faiths, will offer such a sinful resistance to revelation as to finally block its saving purpose being realized. Hence I would not state that “this salvific purpose *is* [italics his] not always realized,” but rather that “this salvific purpose may not always be realized.”

Echeverria goes on to claim that the Second Vatican Council’s Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (*Lumen Gentium* §16) “speaks of the widely realized possibility of inadequately responding” to God’s revelation. He adds: “in other words, the salvific purpose of revelation is not always realized” (856). Vatican II, however, spoke of a serious and fearful possibility; Echeverria turns this into an actuality (“is not always realized”).

Second, rather than call into doubt—as Echeverria asserts—that the Church is not only a sign but also an instrument of salvation for all people (844), I accept this wholeheartedly and have spelled out the kind of (instrumental) efficient causality exercised in the Church’s intercession for “the others.” Such intercessory prayer is inspired by a love, through which the faithful assembled for the Eucharist join themselves to Christ’s high priestly intercession for the whole human race.⁴

Third, I felt quite sad to find Echeverria dismissing Jews as “mere theists” (844). How can such language be reconciled with what St. Paul wrote in Romans 9 and 11 about God’s “irrevocable” gifts to the Jewish people, with what Vatican II taught about the “great spiritual heritage common to Christians and Jews,”⁵ with the teaching of St. John Paul II about “the people of God of the old covenant, which has

⁴ See Gerald O’Collins, “The Church and the Power of Prayer for ‘the Others,’” *Horizons* 41 (2014): 211–29. See also, more briefly, my *The Second Vatican Council on Other Religions*, 164–65.

⁵ Second Vatican Council, Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions, *Nostra Aetate*, §4.

never been revoked,”⁶ and with what Pope Francis wrote in his 2013 exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*?⁷

Later on, Echeverria states that “theistic religions enjoy some knowledge of God derived from general revelation, derived from elements of goodness, truth, and beauty found in these cultures and religions” (855). Presumably this picture applies to the story of the Old Testament, since he has already named Jews as “mere theists.” Does Echeverria want to deny that special revelation was mediated through God’s saving acts in the history of his people and though the words of the prophets?

Fourth, Echeverria disagrees with my interpretation of the teaching of John Paul II in the 1990 encyclical *Redemptoris Missio*: that the Church serves the Kingdom of God and not vice versa. He quotes the Pope’s words about the “the temporal dimension of the kingdom” remaining incomplete “unless it is related to the kingdom of Christ present in the Church” (848). But “being present in” is not synonymous with serving. The Holy Spirit is present in the Church as in a temple. But do we want to say that the Spirit, therefore, “serves” the Church? While being an historical reality that extends beyond the Church to all human beings, the Kingdom is present in a special way in the Church. Yet that does not mean that the Kingdom serves the Church.

Fifth, I do not “separate the universal headship of Christ over all humanity from the Church” (848). Following Thomas Aquinas, I distinguish (without separating) the universal headship of Christ from his headship of the Mystical Body.

Sixth, Echeverria writes: “O’Collins does not attend to the important distinction between God’s general revelation . . . and his special revelation” (850). This is true in the case of *The Second Vatican Council on Other Religions*. As the Council did not apply the qualifiers “special” and “general” when it spoke of revelation, I did not introduce this terminology myself. Two years before, in an earlier book, I had dedicated an entire chapter to “general and special revelation.”⁸ If Echeverria had opened this book, he could not

⁶ Pope John Paul II, 1980 speech in Mainz (Germany), *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 73 (1981): 80.

⁷ Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, §247: “As Christians, we cannot consider Judaism a foreign religion” (see further §§248–49).

⁸ Gerald O’Collins, *Rethinking Fundamental Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 56–95.

have said that I “reject” the “distinction between general and special revelation” (851).

Seventh, Echeverria is right in saying that, apart from God's full, perfect, and complete self-revelation in and through Jesus Christ (*Dei Verbum* §4), the divine revelation is “imperfect [and] incomplete.” But does it follow, as Echeverria maintains, that such revelation that is found elsewhere “by its very nature is not salvific”? How can such (imperfect and incomplete) revelation be “supernatural in origin,” as he states (851), but not “supernatural” in its (saving) effect? Are we meant to think that the divine revelation that came to such figures as Abraham, Moses, and the prophets was not in any sense salvific because this revelation was “imperfect” and “incomplete”? Was no salvation mediated to them when they responded in faith to God's self-revealing initiatives?

At the Second Vatican Council, *Nostra Aetate* observed that “the Catholic Church rejects nothing of those things which are true *and holy*” in other religions. Rather, “it is with sincere respect that she considers those ways of acting and living, those precepts and doctrines, which, although they differ in many [respects] from what she herself holds and proposes, nevertheless, often reflect a ray of that Truth, who illuminates all human beings [see John 1: 9]” (§2; italics added). By recognizing what is “true *and holy*,” *Nostra Aetate* uses a double-sided terminology that, implicitly, distinguishes (but does not separate) the two dimensions of the divine self-communication: revelation and salvation. While saying of other religions that their “ways of acting and living,” along with their “precepts and doctrines,” “differ” in many respects from what the Catholic Church teaches, the Council acknowledges the mysterious impact of Christ in these religions and on their followers.⁹ Since what is “true” among them reflects “the Truth”—that is, the Word of God—presumably, what is “holy” among them also comes from the Word who is the life of human kind (John 1: 4). How can the Word, even through a revelation that may be incomplete and imperfect, illuminate all human beings without conveying to them also something of God's offer of salvation?

⁹ I summarized this teaching as: “Official Catholic teaching acknowledges the living, personal relationship between these ‘others’ and God, mediated by the One who is the Truth of God in person” (*The Second Vatican Council on Other Religions*, 163). Echeverria dismisses this as my “verbal sleight of hand” (860). But was it a fair comment on what *Nostra Aetate* taught?

As Ratzinger pointed out back in 1963 (see my first point above), “revelation always and only becomes a reality where there is faith.” Revelation does not happen without a recipient responding with some kind of faith. Faith, however feeble and limited it may be and however it is attacked by evil, is always in some sense salvific: in some sense it sets the recipient of revelation on the path of salvation. Echeverria seems to imagine, contra the young Ratzinger, that revelation can exist without faith.

Eighth, Echeverria maintains that “God’s grace may reach individuals *despite* but not *through* their religions” (861). This means that their religions contribute nothing to these individuals receiving God’s grace (presumably understood as saving grace). In fact their religions create difficulties in the way of their salvation; it would be better that they did not follow their religions. “Despite” has such ominous overtones, as we can see from an example in a sports paper: “the sprinter reached the finishing line in third place, despite suffering a torn hamstring.” This torn hamstring contributed nothing to his achievement. In fact it created only difficulties, and he would have been better off without it. If Echeverria means what he says, he presents a similar picture about the bad impact of the religions of the world, other than Christianity. How then could *Nostra Aetate* have spoken of “true and holy” elements in these religions (see above), elements that contribute to individuals receiving God’s grace? They can be saved through these elements, not despite them.

In *Redemptoris Missio*, John Paul II stated: “The Spirit’s presence and activity affects not only individuals but also society and history, peoples, cultures *and religions*” (§28; italics added). The Pope clearly affirms here that the Holy Spirit acts in and through the cultural and religious traditions of our world. We must conclude that this presence and activity, to some extent and in some degree, mediates saving grace to individuals who follow their religions. Given the active presence of the Spirit, these religions can and do bring God’s grace to their followers. They are not saved “despite” their religions.

Ninth, Echeverria queries the view that Christianity, Judaism, and Islam “worship the same God” (862), spending most of his time on the case of Islam. He quotes what John Paul II said to young Muslims in a memorable speech in Casablanca: “We believe in the same God, the one God, the living God, [and] the God who created the world, and brings his creatures to their perfection” (865n103). A letter sent in 1076 by Pope Gregory VII to the Muslim king of Mauretania (in modern Algeria) expressed the faith he shared with the king by

saying: "We and you must show in a special way to the other nations an example of charity, for we believe and confess one God, although in different ways, and praise and worship him daily as the creator of all ages and the ruler of this world." The Pope ended by praying "in our hearts and with our lips, that God may lead you to the abode of happiness, to the bosom of the holy patriarch Abraham, after long years of life on earth."¹⁰

Nevertheless, Echeverria tries hard to mitigate such teaching and finishes by saying: "Even if Muslims refer to the same God, that doesn't make Islam a salvific religion" (868). In spite of the positive elements in Islam, explicitly acknowledged by *Lumen Gentium* §16 and *Nostra Aetate* §3, he refuses to accept that the faithful followers of authentic Islam receive anything toward salvation through their faith. I prefer to follow Gregory VII and John Paul II, whose speech in Casablanca has more to add on Muslim life and faith.¹¹

Tenth, when I wrote of Jesus (and not the Church) being the norm for dialogue with others and for proclamation of the good news, Echeverria detects a "separation between Jesus and the Church" (870). But surely we should primarily understand the Church in the light of Jesus's life, ministry, death, resurrection, and sending of the Holy Spirit, and not vice versa? Pope Francis has warned us against a "self-referential Church" and encouraged members of the Catholic Church (and, indeed, other Christians) to make Jesus their constant criterion for discernment and action. So far from separating Jesus and the Church, I stressed what happens at every Eucharist when the faithful lovingly join themselves to the high priestly intercession of Christ our high priest and share in his intercession.¹² We are taken up into him, and not vice versa.

Eleventh, Echeverria ends by suggesting that "perhaps the most unfortunate thing in his [my] book is that there is nothing in it" that encourages the missionary commitment of the Catholic Church (873). But the theme of my book was Vatican II's teaching on the other religions, *not* the missionary mandate of the Church as proposed by the Council. I was not minimalizing that mandate, but had chosen another topic. Even so, pace Echeverria, my book

¹⁰ For details, see my *The Second Vatican Council on Other Religions*, 23–24.

¹¹ For the full text of this speech, see *Pope John Paul II: A Reader*, ed. Gerald O'Collins, Daniel Kendall, and Jeffrey LaBelle (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2007), 148–58.

¹² O'Collins, *The Second Vatican Council on Other Religions*, 165.

contained a number of passages on the mission of the Church and desire to share Jesus with others.¹³

Twelfth, there are misspellings and pieces of misinformation that call for correction. For instance, Echeverria states that the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith's investigation of Jacques Dupuis's *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism* "involved conversations [in the plural] with the CDF that began in the spring of 1998" (838n3). To be sure, the CDF's procedures against Dupuis began in the spring of 1998, but he knew nothing of this before receiving a nine-page document accusing him of various doctrinal errors in October of 1998. His one and only meeting with the CDF eventually came on September 5, 2000. There was no series of conversations that began in the spring of 1998.¹⁴

In writing this response I could press on and challenge other claims made by Echeverria, but enough has been said. Let me conclude by observing that, thus far in my life, I have authored or co-authored sixty-eight published books. But I have never before had any of my books reviewed so negatively and at such length. N&V

¹³ For instance, *ibid.*, 143–48, 200–1.

¹⁴ For a complete account of the Dupuis affair, see Gerald O'Collins, *On the Left Bank of the Tiber* (Brisbane, AU: Connor Court, 2013), 213–51.