

Ad Father O’Collins

EDUARDO ECHEVERRIA
Sacred Heart Major Seminary
Detroit, Michigan

I AM GRATEFUL TO Fr. Gerald O’Collins, S.J., for his response to my article review¹ of his book *The Second Vatican Council on Other Religions*. Let me also extend a word of gratitude to the editors of this journal for their invitation to respond to Fr. O’Collins’s response. O’Collins identifies eleven objections in my article review to which he responds (although, honestly and respectfully put, he mostly ignores my arguments against his views). Rather than deal with each of his responses, however, I think that his objections may be conveniently organized into three groups that address several key questions I raised.

The first group deals with the question “is there revelation within other religions?” O’Collins and I agree that there is, that the Second Vatican Council and Pope John Paul II also judge that to be the case, but we differ as to the nature of that revelation, how it is known, its effects upon its recipients, and hence, the corresponding distinction and unity of the modes of revelation, general and special revelation (objections 1, 3, 6, and 7). Indeed, we even differ as to whether Vatican II moved beyond the distinction between general and special revelation. Without leaving the first group of objections behind us, I will also briefly consider a second group of objections (8, 9, and 11) because of their relevance to the relationship between faith and general revelation. O’Collins thinks that persons who never hear the Gospel can nevertheless attain salvation through their response in faith to God’s general revelation alone. There is a third group of

¹ Eduardo Echeverria, “Vatican II on the Religions,” *Nova et Vetera* (English) 13, no. 3 (2015): 837–73.

objections (4, 5, and 10) that focus on the question regarding the relationship between Christ, the Church, and the Kingdom of God. O'Collins's theses are: "the Church serves the Kingdom of God, and not vice versa,"² and "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."

Distractions

Regarding the first group of objections, O'Collins distracts the reader's attention from the real issue that divides him and me—and, I argued, Vatican II and John Paul II—by claiming that I challenge his "position that, when human beings accept God's [general] revelation, they receive something that *sets them on the way of salvation*," or as he also says "*on the path of salvation*" (emphasis added). Later in his response, he makes the same point, but this time, he says that I refuse to accept that (in spite of the positive elements in Islam) the faithful followers of authentic Islam receive anything *toward salvation through their faith*" (emphasis added). But that is not the position he took in his book, and hence that is not the position I challenged in my article review. These emphasized phrases in the three quotations from O'Collins suggest that I oppose Vatican II's use of the traditional category of *praeparatio evangelii*: "Whatever good or truth is found amongst them [non-Christian religions] is looked upon by the Church as a preparation for the Gospel."³ But I explicitly embrace this position (842, 855) as one of the important doctrinal teachings regarding non-Christian religions in Vatican II documents.⁴

² Gerald O'Collins, "Vatican II on the Religions: Response," in this present issue of *Nova et Vetera* (English) (15, no. 4 [2017]). See also O'Collins, *Jesus Our Redeemer: A Christian Approach to Salvation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 236, and *The Second Vatican Council: Message and Meaning* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2014), 108.

³ *Lumen Gentium* §16.

⁴ Another distraction blocking the perception of what I was actually saying about Jews is O'Collins's "sadness" at my referring to Jews as "mere theists." He asks, "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, [. . . etc.]?" But the opposition O'Collins sets up here is fanciful because he ignores the context in which I refer to Jews as mere theists. Of course I, too, along with O'Collins, affirm the teaching of St. Paul and Vatican II. But, as O'Collins also correctly notes, this is "special revelation . . . mediated through God's saving acts in the history of his people and through the

Actual Objections

The position of O'Collins that I actually opposed in my article review is that the knowledge of God's general revelation, which is God's self-revelation in and through the works of creation and conscience, *is in itself* salvific. For O'Collins, there is a correlation between revelation and faith in the sense that not only is faith indispensable for receiving God's revelation so that the salvific purpose of revelation may reach its goal,⁵ but also it seems that, for O'Collins, revelation *becomes* a reality in or through faith: "Revelation and salvation cannot, as it were, hang in the air without reaching their 'object' and being accepted (or rejected) by their addresses. . . . Revelation and salvation simply cannot happen *outside* the experience of human beings."⁶ Elsewhere he says, "Divine revelation is actualized in its outcome, human faith."⁷ Or he adds in his Response to me: "God's self-revelation exists in living subjects, those

words of the prophets." In fact, not only do I agree, but I said as much in my article review ("Vatican II on the Religions," 866n109). Now, the context in which I referred to Jews as "mere theists" is *Lumen Gentium* §16, where Jews and Muslims are referred to as those "who through no fault of their own do not know the gospel of Christ or His Church." The only (uncontroversial) point I was making here about Jews (and Muslims), and which I take *Lumen Gentium* §16 to be making, is well stated by Dutch philosophical theologians Jeroen de Ridder and René van Woudenberg: "Christians will think it crucially important that God is a trinity, while Muslims and Jews are bound to emphasize that God is one in every respect (which they will take to entail that He is not a trinity)" ("Referring to, Believing in, and Worshipping the Same God: A Reformed View," *Faith and Philosophy* 31, no. 1 [2014]: 46–67, at 61). Equally uncontroversial for the Catholic Christian is *Lumen Gentium* §14's statement: "Basing itself upon sacred Scripture and tradition, it [sacred Synod] teaches that the Church, now sojourning on earth as an exile, is necessary for salvation. For Christ, made 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." I took both these points as implied in the statement of *Lumen Gentium* §16 that I cited above—namely, that Jews and Muslims are referred to as those "who through no fault of their own do not know the gospel of Christ or His Church." Does O'Collins disagree?

⁵ This is how O'Collins puts his point about the correlation of faith and revelation in his book *Rethinking Fundamental Theology: Toward a New Fundamental Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 166.

⁶ O'Collins, *Rethinking Fundamental Theology*, 72. Thirty years earlier, O'Collins made the same point almost verbatim in his book, *Fundamental Theology* (New York: Paulist Press, 1981), 59.

⁷ O'Collins, *Second Vatican Council, Message and Meaning*, 9.

who respond with faith. . . . Revelation does not happen without a recipient responding with some kind of faith. . . . Echeverría seems to imagine . . . that revelation can exist without faith.” It certainly seems that, for O’Collins, revelation becomes a reality in or through faith. I challenged this view, calling it an “actualistic theology of revelation” in my review article.⁸ If this is not what O’Collins means then I am at a lost to understand him. Yes, there is no salvation without the knowledge of divine revelation, but the converse does not follow—namely, no revelation without salvation, as the above quotes suggest and as he insists in his book, *The Second Vatican Council on Other Religions*. I admit that I am puzzled by this latter claim because it suggests that O’Collins conflates the difference between ontological and epistemological matters. But revelation necessarily includes both an objective (ontological) dimension and a subjective (epistemic) dimension.

By the former, I mean the ontological objectivity of the historical reality of special revelation: the words and deeds of God’s self-revelation, which culminate in Christ, who is the fullness and mediator of all revelation, as a condition of knowing revelation and as a condition of its saving significance. So, for example, the condition under which the bodily resurrection of Jesus is true depends on the state of affairs that Jesus actually rose bodily from the dead. It is true independently of whether anyone knows it to be true, and hence its being known is not a necessary condition for it being a revelation of God or for it being true. Regarding the subjective dimension, it refers to the act of God’s self-presence, indeed the act of God’s revealing himself in a living subject by the power of the Holy Spirit, enabling man to respond in faith to the objective reality of revelation. In that sense, God’s objective revelation demands an internal revelation in the

⁸ O’Collins claims that this is the early Joseph Ratzinger’s view. The limits of this response prohibit me from giving an alternative account of Ratzinger’s theology of revelation. I give an account of his theology of revelation in my article “Revelation, Faith, and Tradition: Catholic Ecumenical Dialogue,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 49 (2014): 25–62, esp. at 48–60. Suffice it to say here that we would misunderstand Ratzinger if we took him to be saying that the Scripture *becomes* revelation when it is actually known to man in faith, as if Ratzinger is suggesting that the verbal character of Scripture remains external to revelation. No, that would be a version, in Ratzinger’s own words, of an “extreme actualistic theology according to which the Word of God only takes place in the word of Scripture as a new event each time it is read” (Joseph Ratzinger, Commentary on *Dei Verbum*, the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, in *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*, vol.3 [New York: Herder and Herder, 1969], 167–98, 262–72, esp. at 270n12).

recipient of that revelation, but that subjective dimension of revelation comes into its own by being realized in the subject only if it is positioned in relation to the objective revelation. If we distinguish, then, between objective and subjective dimensions of revelation—and we must, since the conditions that make something true are distinct from the conditions under which I know it to be true—it follows that, pace O'Collins, objective revelation can exist without faith, revelation without salvation.

Modes of Revelation: General and Special

Moving on to O'Collins's position regarding the correlation between faith and general revelation, a prior question must be considered: What is the distinction between the two modes of revelation, between general and special revelation? Briefly, general revelation is God's revelation of himself to all men in and through the works of creation. Regarding this revelation, God reveals himself to all men at all times and all places, such that men, in principle, may know something of God's existence, of his attributes, and of his moral law (Rom 1:20; 2:14–15), and hence this “revelation is not limited to certain people, places, or times, but is truly general.”⁹ It is ubiquitous because “it comes to us through conditions [created realities and conscience] that are present at all times and places.”¹⁰ Therefore, in principle, all have access to some knowledge of God via his general revelation. By contrast, according to *Dei Verbum* §2, special revelation is God revealing himself specially in and through salvation history, a history that runs through the events and people of Israel and culminates in the concentration point of that history in Jesus Christ, who is the mediator and fullness of all revelation. Jointly constitutive of God's special revelation are its inseparably connected words (verbal revelation) and deeds, which are intrinsically bound to each other because neither is complete without the other: the historical realities of redemption are inseparably connected to God's verbal communication of truth in order that we may, as Catholic theologian Francis Martin puts it, “participate more fully in the *realities* mediated by the words.”¹¹ In other words, a core presupposition of *Dei Verbum*

⁹ De Ridder and Van Woudenberg, “Referring to, Believing in, and Worshipping the Same God,” 47.

¹⁰ Ibid., 50.

¹¹ Fr. Francis Martin, “Some Directions in Catholic Biblical Theology,” in *Out of Egypt: Biblical Theology and Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Craig Bartholomew et al., Scripture and Hermeneutics 5 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004), 65–87, at 67–68.

§2 is that “without God’s acts the words would be empty, without His word the acts would be blind,”¹² as was admirably stated by Reformed theologian Geerhardus Vos. Moreover, special revelation, by contrast with general revelation, “is spatiotemporally limited—it comes to us through historical events at special times and places and then through the testimony of others about these events.”¹³

O’Collins claims that Vatican II “did not apply the qualifiers ‘special’ and ‘general’ when it spoke of revelation,” and hence he did not use this terminological distinction in his book. He rebuffs my claim that he rejects this distinction by urging me to look at his earlier book *Rethinking Fundamental Theology*,¹⁴ in which he devotes an entire chapter to general and special revelation. Yes, he does reflect in this earlier book on the modalities of revelation, but I still maintain that he rejects the traditional meaning of this distinction in the Catholic tradition (not to mention Evangelical and Reformed as well), as I briefly described it above, and its corresponding *duplex ordo cognitionis*. The latter refers to a “twofold order of knowledge [that is] distinct both in principle and also in object,” according to the *Decreta Dogmatica Concilii Vaticani de Fide Catholica et de Ecclesia Christi*, the dogmatic constitution of the First Vatican Council (1870) on the Catholic faith, *Dei Filius*: “In its [epistemic] principle, because in the one we know by natural reason, in the other by divine faith; in its object, because apart from what natural reason can attain, there are proposed to our belief mysteries that are hidden in God that can never be known unless they are revealed by God.”¹⁵ So, although it is true that Vatican II does not use these words—for example, the term “general revelation”—the concepts and, hence, the realities to which these words refer is present in *Dei Verbum* §2: “God, who through the Word creates all things (see John 1:3) and keeps them in exis-

¹² As Geerhardus Vos, “The Idea of Biblical Theology as a Science and as a Theological Discipline,” Inaugural Address as Professor of Biblical Theology, Princeton Theological Seminary, May 8, 1894, First Presbyterian Church, Princeton (repr. in Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation: The Shorter Writings of Geerhardus Vos* [Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1980], 3–24).

¹³ De Ridder and Van Woudenberg, “Referring to, Believing in, and Worshiping the Same God,” 50.

¹⁴ O’Collins, *Rethinking Fundamental Theology*, 56–95.

¹⁵ Heinrich Denzinger, *Compendium of Creeds, Definitions, and Declarations on Matter of Faith and Morals*, ed. by Peter Hünermann, 43rd ed., trans. and ed. Robert Fastiggi and Anne Englund Nash (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2012), no. 3015.

tence, gives men an enduring witness to Himself in created realities (see Rom. 1:19–20).” It is also present in *Dei Verbum* §6: “As a sacred synod [Vatican I] has affirmed, God, the beginning and end of all things, can be known with certainty from created reality by the light of human reason (see Rom. 1:20).” Indeed, *Dei Verbum* §6 implicitly affirms this very teaching by referring in note 6 to Vatican I’s *Dei Filius*, chapter 2 (“On Revelation”): “The same Holy mother Church holds and teaches that God, the beginning and end of all things, can be known with certainty from the things that were created things through the natural light of human reason, for ‘ever since the creation of the world, his invisible nature. . . has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made’ [Rom 1:19–20].”¹⁶ I made these very points in my review, but O’Collins ignores them in his response. Thus, there is no justification for not attending to this distinction in his book on Vatican II and non-Christian religions simply because the words are not used, since both the concepts and realities to which they refer are, nevertheless, present in *Dei Verbum*.

Natural Reason

Furthermore, both *Dei Verbum* and Vatican I’s *Decreta Dogmatica* (ch. 4: “On Faith and Reason”), not to mention the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (§§31–35) and John Paul II’s 1998 encyclical letter *Fides et Ratio* (§§8–9, 19–20, 22, 67), affirm that this knowledge of God via general revelation is acquired, in principle, through *natural reason*. Significantly, there are *naturally* knowable elements of truth and goodness—that is, known in principle not only pre-philosophically, spontaneously and universally but also through natural theological arguments, which are reflective and theoretical. Thus, the Catholic position gives natural reason some positive role in acquiring knowledge of God mediated by the things that he has created. Aidan Nichols, for one, is right that, for Vatican I, the “natural light of human reason” meant “human reason *tout court*, with no attempt to lay down in advance what mode or style of human rationality that might be.”¹⁷ Be that as it may, natural human reason possesses the possibility of coming on its own power to knowledge of the existence and attributes of God. This is a principle of Catholic thought according to the *duplex ordo cognitionis*.

¹⁶ Ibid., no. 3004.

¹⁷ Aidan Nichols, O.P., *Epiphany: A Theological Introduction to Catholicism* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1995), 16. This is also the view of Fergus Kerr, O.P., in “Knowing God by Reason Alone: What Vatican I Never Said,” *New Blackfriars* 91, no. 1033 (May 2010): 215–28.

Moreover, in the concrete conditions of life, there are obstacles hampering human reason's actual functioning, impeding its proper functioning and its *natural* ability of grasping the truths about God mediated through creation. So, another way was made available so that natural human reason could properly function so as to grasp the truth about God's existence. That other way is the testimony of the divine Word-revelation: our natural knowledge of God's general revelation is the fruit of knowing the testimony of the Word-revelation. Therefore, the fathers of Vatican I write, "It is to be ascribed to this divine revelation that such truths among things divine that of themselves are not beyond human reason can, even in the present condition of mankind, be known by everyone with facility, with firm certitude, and with no admixture of error."¹⁸ This very point is reiterated by Vatican II in *Dei Verbum* §6.¹⁹ But this makes divine revelation relatively necessary only respecting divine truths that, in principle, do not exceed reason's grasp, truths that are in principle *naturally* knowable. Such revelation makes it easier for human reason, in a concrete situation, as a *de facto* actuality, to acquire *natural* knowledge of God derived from the things that have been made.

Undermining the Distinction between General and Special Revelation

To get to the main point, although O'Collins accepts the distinction between general and special revelation, he undermines the difference between these modes of revelation by denying, first, that the knowledge acquired through general revelation is received through natural reason. Second, according to O'Collins, persons who never hear the Gospel can nevertheless attain salvation through their response in faith to God's general revelation alone. In other words, non-Christians are saved by their "response" to their own religion that contains elements of truth and goodness that are, in fact, also God's general revelation. In short, general revelation in itself is salvific. O'Collins's position results in conflating general and special revelation. O'Collins affirms, "All human beings have access to this general revelation of God mediated through the beautiful and orderly works of creation and through their own inner spiritual reality."²⁰ But O'Collins affirms that the activity of acquiring saving knowledge of God through created reality is a matter

¹⁸ Denzinger, *Compendium*, no. 3005.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, no. 4206.

²⁰ O'Collins, *Rethinking Fundamental Theology*, 58.

of authentic faith even for the non-Christian. He makes this point in expressing some misgiving about natural theology:

My main misgiving about natural theology is that the term could readily suggest that drawing conclusions about the existence and nature of God from the created universe is a merely natural exercise of unaided human reason. Beyond question, the active presence of the risen Christ and his Holy Spirit need not be consciously felt, but in a wide variety of ways this presence *is extended to everyone*. Right from the beginning, God has freely called all men and women to the supernatural destiny of eternal life; that call affects every human act, including the activity of reflecting on the knowledge of God available through created reality. In that sense, while they may not be aware of this, those who practice “natural theology” are always engaged with “supernatural theology.”²¹

In this connection, O'Collins is concerned, as a matter of fundamental theology, and not natural theology, with “the conditions that open human beings . . . to accepting in faith the self-communication of God.”²² O'Collins conceives the correlation between general revelation and faith to be such that persons who never hear the Gospel can nevertheless attain salvation through their response in faith to God's general revelation alone. The problematic assumption here is not that there is the *possibility* of general revelation within other religions manifesting truth and goodness, but rather that the knowledge of such revelation in itself mediates saving faith.²³ In other words, the problem is not that “Christ is ontologically and causally exclu-

²¹ Ibid., 15.

²² Ibid., 15. When he is not considering natural theology's function with respect to fundamental theology, O'Collins's position on natural theology as such is traditional, given that it concerns “Reflection on reasons for accepting the existence of a personal God [that] normally comes from those who already believe in God. . . . Far from replacing belief, their arguments for the reasonableness of belief in God arise from prior faith in and experience of God” (ibid., 29). Such reflection is concerned with “meaning, evidence, and truth (understanding truth in terms of what we can justifiably claim to know and conclude from the evidence)” (ibid., 34). This position is entirely within the boundaries of Catholic thought. O'Collins places natural theology within the dynamic of *fides quarens intellectum*, and this make it necessarily *a posteriori*, rather than *a priori*, a “second moment” within that dynamic.

²³ O'Collins, *Second Vatican Council: Message and Meaning*, 137.

sive to salvation, but not necessarily epistemologically.”²⁴ This is the position of Vatican II’s *Lumen Gentium* §16 and John Paul II, which I call “accessibilism” to contrast it with a broad inclusivism, which is O’Collins’s position.²⁵ The difference between these two is well put by William Lane Craig: “Genuine inclusivists believe that salvation is not merely accessible to but is *actually* accessed by persons who never hear the gospel. Inclusivism may be broad or narrow, ranging all the way from universalism to narrow particularism.”²⁶ Terrance L. Tiessen helpfully defines “accessibilism”: “Accessibilism asserts that Jesus Christ is exclusively God’s means of salvation but that there is biblical reason to be hopeful about the *possibility* of salvation for those who do not hear the gospel. It grants that non-Christians can be saved but does not regard the religions as God’s designed instruments in their salvation.”²⁷ Thus, supporting accessibilism (as the Church does) neither undermines the singular uniqueness of Jesus Christ—namely, that salvation is “proper to him alone, exclusive, universal and absolute”²⁸—nor diminish the necessity of the Church’s missionary mandate. These two reasons distinguish accessibilism from a broad inclusivism.

In *Lumen Gentium* §16, the Council addresses the important question regarding the possible fate of the unevangelized who, through no fault of their own (the “invincibly ignorant”), have failed to respond to the Gospel. Can the inculpably ignorant be saved by Christ apart from the knowledge of Christ? If so, then, the knowledge of Christ

²⁴ Gavin D’Costa, *Christianity and World Religions: Disputed Questions in the Theology of Religions* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 7.

²⁵ I describe O’Collins’s brand of inclusivism—namely, “inclusive pluralism” à la Jacques Dupuis—in my article review (“Vatican II on the Religions,” 838–39).

²⁶ William Lane Craig, “Politically Incorrect Salvation,” in *Christian Apologetics in the Modern World*, ed. T. P. Phillips and D. Ockholm (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1995), 75–97, at 84 (emphasis added).

²⁷ Terrance L. Tiessen, *Who can Be Saved? Reassessing Salvation in Christ and World Religions* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004), 483 (see also 33–34). Tiessen rightly understands that “accessibilism can be traced in Christian thought back to the second century” and “is now strongly affirmed in official Roman Catholic documents” (ibid., 22).

²⁸ Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Dominus Iesus* (“On the Unicity and Salvific Universality of Jesus Christ and the Church”) (2000), §15: “Jesus Christ has a significance and a value for the human race and its history which are unique and singular, proper to him alone, exclusive, universal and absolute. Jesus is, in fact, the Word of God made man for the salvation of all” (accessed August 1, 2017, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20000806_dominus-iesus_en.html).

is not epistemologically necessary to access the saving benefits of Christ's saving work. But the council did not answer that question in *Lumen Gentium* §16 without considering the necessary conditions²⁹ that must be met for the possibility of non-Christians being saved apart from *explicitly* acknowledging and responding to Christ and his saving works. The constraints of this response prohibit me from considering those conditions here.³⁰ Suffice it to say that, although these conditions "must be fulfilled in order to avoid culpability," they are, as Francis Sullivan correctly notes, not a "*cause* of salvation."³¹ In other words, invincible ignorance of the Gospel is a condition of, but

²⁹ Ralph Martin gives a detailed exposition of the necessary conditions under which the invincibly ignorant may be saved: "1. That non-Christians be not culpable for their ignorance of the gospel. 2. That non-Christians seek God with a sincere heart. 3. That non-Christians try to live their life in conformity with what they know of God's will [through general revelation]. This is commonly spoken of as following the natural law or the light of conscience. It is important to note, as the Council does, in order to avoid a Pelagian interpretation, that this is possible only because people are 'moved by grace.' 4. That non-Christians welcome or receive whatever 'good or truth' they live amidst—referring possibly to elements of their non-Christian religions or cultures, which may refract to some degree the light that enlightens every man (John 1:9). These positive elements are intended to be 'preparation for the Gospel.' One could understand this to mean either a preparation for the actual hearing of the gospel or preparation for, perhaps, some communication of God by interior illumination" (*Will Many Be Saved? What Vatican II Actually Teaches and Its Implications for the New Evangelization* [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012], 9).

³⁰ Do these conditions set the boundaries of invincible ignorance? No, says Pius IX's *Singulari Quadem* (1854). He speaks there of the invincibly ignorant as not being subject to any guilt in this matter of the one true Church. Still, he adds: "Now, who could presume for oneself the ability to set the boundaries of such ignorance, taking into consideration the natural differences of peoples, lands, talents and so many other factors?" Indeed, Pius writes: "Far be it from Us, Venerable Brethren, to presume on the limits of the divine mercy which is infinite; far from Us, to wish to scrutinize the hidden counsel and 'judgments of God' which are 'a great deep' [Ps 35:7] and cannot be penetrated by human thought" (*The Sources of Catholic Dogma*, ed. Roy J. Deferrari [St. Louis, MO: B. Herder, 1957], 415). See also, on invincible ignorance, Pius IX's encyclical to the Italian Bishops on August 10, 1863, *Quanto Conficiamur Moerore*: (Denzinger, *Compendium*, nos. 2865–67). Herman Bavinck pointedly states: "Even the pope [Pius IX] did not dare to define the limits of this ignorance" ("The Catholicity of Christianity and the Church," *Calvin Theological Journal* 27 [1992]: 220–51, at 234).

³¹ Francis Sullivan, *Salvation Outside of the Church? Tracing the History of the Catholic Response* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2002), 77.

not a cause, of salvation. For, the full and sufficient cause of salvation is Jesus Christ.

Thus, in O'Collins's broad inclusivism, man's reflective engagement regarding the things made by God is already, whether he knows it or not, a question of supernatural faith and, indeed, of grace, mediated by the Holy Spirit, and such faith can be found in persons of any religion. The nature of faith here is such that a person has somehow received the gift of faith from God without any explicit reference to Jesus Christ or the biblical message (Rom 10:17). In O'Collins's words, this is a "faith triggered by the general revelation of God."³²

O'Collins adds, "Fundamental theology takes up a much wider agenda than simply truths about God, the world, and the human condition that may be available through the 'natural' powers of thought."³³ What, then, is this much wider agenda, according to O'Collins? He says that agenda is to show that, "through revelation, including *general revelation* . . . God calls and enables human beings to enter into the new personal relationship of faith, . . . involving men and women with God as One worthy of unconditional praise, worship, and obedience"³⁴ Thus, O'Collins thinks that this agenda implies the rejection of the natural-supernatural scheme of things with regard to revelation. Why? He says, "Granted that the divine self-communication reached its absolute and complete climax with his incarnation, life, death and resurrection, should we accept or vigorously oppose the belief that *all experience of revelation and salvation relates to Christ*? As regards the 'where' of God's self-communication, is it true that outside Christ there is neither revelation nor salvation?"³⁵ Let's be clear here. O'Collins is not merely affirming the universal scope of Christ's atoning work—namely, that, in God's all-embracing love, he truly and sincerely desires the salvation of all men in Christ (1 Tim 2:3; John 3:16)³⁶—as do 2 Corinthians 5:19 ("God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself") and the CCC: "Jesus, the Son of God, freely suffered death for us in complete and free submission to the will of God, his Father. By his death he has conquered

³² O'Collins, *Rethinking Fundamental Theology*, 63 (see further 63–65). Space prohibits me from pursuing the question here of whether O'Collins's view contradicts *Dominus Iesus* §7: "The distinction between theological faith and belief, in the other religions, must be firmly held."

³³ *Ibid.*, 14.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 61; emphasis added.

³⁵ O'Collins, *Fundamental Theology* [1981], 114. See also 53–54.

³⁶ O'Collins, *Jesus Our Redeemer*, 219.

death, and so opened the possibility of salvation to all men" (§1019). Rather, O'Collins wants, *in addition*, to affirm the "universal significance of Christ for revelation."³⁷ What does he mean?

Christ's Universal Significance for Revelation?

In one sense, O'Collins has in mind the Pauline vision of cosmic redemption, liberating and transforming the whole of creation.³⁸ As Yves Congar puts it, "the restoration or re-formation of nature is included in the redemptive plan and in the redemptive power of Jesus Christ." He adds, "This . . . implies and signifies that an agreement is in itself possible, that is a certain reciprocal ordering and a certain proportion exists between nature and grace, creational order and order of redemption, civilization and evangelization."³⁹ It follows from this vision of cosmic redemption that Christians are called to engage in the sanctification of culture by transforming it through God's grace in Christ. In short, they are called to the work of restoring all areas of culture—indeed, all dimensions of human existence, all of creation itself—to Christ so that "in everything he might be preeminent" (Col 1:18) and of making them share in the redemption he accomplished and, in this way, to be his agents, coworkers, for exercising his lordship in creation. As the Pontifical Council for Culture states: "[A] Christian cultural project . . . gives Christ, the Redeemer of man, center of the universe and of history, the scope of completely renewing the lives of men 'by opening the vast fields of culture to His saving power.'"⁴⁰ In sum, the Council explains, "the primary objective of [this] approach to culture is to inject the lifeblood of the Gospel into cultures to renew from within and transform in the light of Revelation the visions of men and society that shape cultures, the concepts of men and women, of the family and of education, of school and of university, of freedom and of truth, of labor and of leisure, of the economy and of society, of the sciences and of the arts."⁴¹

In a more pertinent sense for addressing the question of the salvation of non-Christians, Christ is the mediator of salvation for every-

³⁷ Ibid., 220.

³⁸ Ibid., 219.

³⁹ Yves Congar, *Jesus Christ*, trans. Luke O'Neil (New York: Herder and Herder, 1966), 176.

⁴⁰ Pontifical Council for Culture, *Towards a Pastoral Approach to Culture* (1999), §§3 and 6 (accessed August 1, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/cultr/documents/rc_pc_pc-cultr_doc_03061999_pastoral_en.html).

⁴¹ Ibid., §25.

one not only through his redemptive work but also through general revelation.⁴² I quoted O'Collins above: "Through revelation, including *general revelation* . . . God calls and enables human beings to enter into the new personal relationship of faith . . . involving men and women with God as One worthy of unconditional praise, worship, and obedience."⁴³ The focus here is on general revelation and how Christ mediates a saving grace through a person's response in faith to general revelation alone. O'Collins explains: "[Christ] is the universal and exclusive agent of creation who preserves everything in existence." "Through him [the Word of God] all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made" (John 1:3); "For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible. . . . All things were created by him and for him" (Eph 1:16). Therefore, "Whenever the created world and its history mediate a disclosure of God, those who receive this disclosure are in fact knowing God through Christ. . . . Christ's agency is as broad and as old as creation itself."⁴⁴ Most important is that O'Collins holds that this "belief [regarding Christ as the Mediator of creation] underpins a conclusion about Christ's role for salvation." That is: "Wherever the created world and its inner and outer history mediate God's grace, those who receive this *saving* grace are in fact receiving it through Christ. As divine agent of creation, Christ also brings the grace of God through the external world and the inner experience of human beings."⁴⁵ His view is then of a grace-endowed creation revelation,

⁴² O'Collins, *Jesus Our Redeemer*, 220. See also 32–34.

⁴³ O'Collins, *Rethinking Fundamental Theology*, 61 (emphasis added).

⁴⁴ O'Collins, *Fundamental Theology* [1981], 116.

⁴⁵ O'Collins, *Jesus Our Redeemer*, 228 (emphasis added). O'Collins also gives an account of the "universal presence of Christ" in light of *Gaudium et Spes* §22: "For, by his incarnation, he, the Son of God, has in a certain way united himself with each man" (*Interpreting Jesus* [Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2002; originally Paulist Press, 1983], 204). O'Collins holds that "right here and now he [Christ] has already united everyone to himself" (Gerald O'Collins, S.J., and Mario Farrugia, S.J., *Catholicism: The Story of Catholic Christianity* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003], 391). In this light, he speaks of "an ontological unity of all humanity in Christ" (O'Collins, *Jesus Our Redeemer*, 221). He means thereby that, "through his incarnation, Christ moved into historical solidarity with all human beings, as well as with the whole created world. He entered history and became, in a sense, every man and every woman" (*ibid.*, 227). This claim is repeated in explaining the meaning of the "universal presence of Christ and his Holy Spirit": "in some real sense all human beings are 'in Christ' and the Holy Spirit is 'in' all human beings"; that is, "Christ was

of a general revelation. But why is it *saving* grace? Why not common grace, which is an insightful theological concept from Reformational Christianity? And why is it not *prevenient* grace?

Common Grace?

Briefly, common grace is a gift of God in Christ through the work of the Spirit, a universal favor that is a non-saving grace at work in the whole of creation, indeed, granted to humanity as such, to believer and unbeliever alike (Matt 5:45) in their post-Fall condition, enabling the recognition of the truth, beauty, and goodness that is present also in the pagan world. For example, is it not common grace that made it possible for the Athenians to know that men are God's children, as even some of their own poets said, and hence, as his offspring, men live and move and have their being in and through God (Acts 17:28)? But clearly St. Paul does not consider this knowledge of God that Athenians possessed a saving knowledge of God. He refutes their idolatry by concluding from the knowledge they do have that, therefore, "we ought not think that the Divine Nature is like gold or silver or stone" (vv. 28–29). Furthermore, he focuses specific attention on the altar "to the unknown [*agnosto*] God" worshipped by the Athenians in "ignorance [*agnouontes*]" (v. 23). St. Paul then addresses them from two angles. As Peter Leithart explains:

On the one hand, Paul introduces the Athenians to the unknown God (v. 23), identifying this God with the Creator who made humanity from one man and who orchestrates the history of nations so that human beings will seek Him. The unknown God is the God in whom all live and move and have being. This God is the God who raised Jesus from the dead (v. 31). The fact that there is an altar to this God in the Athenian

not merely *with us* (through creation and incarnation) and *for us* (through his ministry and crucifixion) but also *in us*" (O'Collins, *Rethinking Fundamental Theology*, 298, 302, 311; see also *Catholicism*, 391). He consistently aligns himself with John Paul II (*Redemptoris Hominis*, §§8, 13, and 18), who also found *Gaudium et Spes* §22 particularly important in giving an account of the sense in which Christ is the New Head of all men, of the reborn human race, the New Humanity. O'Collins's account, as well as its consistency with John Paul II's own reflections on *Gaudium et Spes* §22, deserves a careful analysis that I cannot give here, but I do in my article, "The Salvation of Non-Christians? Reflections on Vatican II's *Gaudium et Spes* 22, *Lumen Gentium* 16, Gerald O'Collins, S.J., and St. John Paul II," forthcoming in *Angelicum*.

forest of idols is proof that “He is not far from each of us” (v. 27). On the other hand, Paul’s message is a warning. Up to now, the Creator God overlooked (*huperorao*) Athenian (and general pagan) ignorance, but the time of ignorance (*agnoia*) is at an end. Paul’s sermon ends with a call to repent of idolatry and specifically of the ignorant worship of the unknown God.

Furthermore, adds Leithart, “Paul’s sermon thus reflects a complex relation with Athenian religion. . . . Substantively, Paul treats Athenian religion as a *praeparatio evangelii*. Were the Athenians to repent, they would both reject *and* fulfill their traditional faith, rejecting false notions of divine nature and abandoning false worship, but coming to genuine knowledge of a God they have always inchoately known. The temporal frame is crucial to Paul: Once their ignorance was excusable, but now it is culpable. A new time has come, and that time demands repentance.”⁴⁶

Leithart’s account, let us call it the “Areopagus paradigm” of Acts 17, makes sense of the *praeparatio evangelii* when engaging non-Christians. We can recognize that the Athenians had some knowledge about God and, hence, that they were not in total darkness, and so we can say that this knowledge implies “some resemblance to truth and reality.”⁴⁷ But we must also say that some of their claims were false because incompatible with Christian truth claims.

Is all Knowledge of God a Saving Knowledge?

Moreover, we can also recognize that this knowledge cannot be saving knowledge in itself of God, since it did not result in “glorifying God” or “giving thanks to him” (Rom 1:21). Rather, it issued forth in “idolatry” (vv. 24–25, 29). This conclusion dovetails with St. Paul’s reasoning in Romans 1:20–21: “What may be known about God is plain to [human beings], because God has made it plain to them . . . from what has been made.” Yet, they have spurned this knowledge in favor of idolatry: “For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish minds were darkened.” That is why St. Paul calls then to repentance. I will return below to Romans 1:20–21. For now, I think we can say that O’Collins begs the question here about the kind of

⁴⁶ Peter Leithart, “What is Christianity? A View from Acts 17,” unpublished paper presented at a meeting of Evangelicals and Catholics Together, June 6, 2016. I cite these passages with permission from the author.

⁴⁷ O’Collins, *Second Vatican Council: Message and Meaning*, 49.

grace that is granted by God in Christ. He just assumes that this grace is a “saving grace.” And at the root of this assumption is a false dilemma O’Collins sets before us.⁴⁸ He explains:

If, on the one hand, we maintain that outside Christ there is no revelation, what of those who profess to know God but who have never heard of Christ? . . . But if, on the other hand, we admit that God is truly disclosed to them, we appear to tamper with the unique absoluteness of Christ’s person and work. It looks as if he ceases to be universally significant for revelation and hence for salvation.⁴⁹

We may not infer from exclusive salvation in Christ, both ontologically and causally, to a Christo-monistic conception of revelation—namely, to an exclusive revelation in Christ. Certainly not, since the Catholic tradition (as well as Evangelical and Reformed traditions) holds to the proposition that God reveals himself universally in and through the works of creation, and hence there is a general revelation of God in addition to special revelation, salvation history. This revelation makes possible some knowledge of God’s existence, his attributes, and the moral law. Furthermore, we can affirm that knowledge of God is possible without tampering with the “unique absoluteness of Christ’s person and work”⁵⁰ because generally speaking a saving knowledge of God is not available to men through their response to God’s general revelation alone. I say “generally” because *Lumen Gentium* §16 considers “the necessary conditions for and actual limitations on the possibility of non-Christians [in particular, the invincibly ignorant] being saved without coming to explicit faith in Christ and membership in the Catholic Church.”⁵¹ In contrast, O’Collins’s broad inclusivism does tamper with Christ’s salvific unicity, of his person and work—that is, his unique absoluteness—because O’Collins holds that the knowledge itself of general revelation *is* salvific and, hence, that men can be saved by the knowledge of general revelation alone. O’Collins says that, “even before accepting the gospel,” non-Christians “already enjoy some elements of revelation

⁴⁸ Presented in two places of which I know: *Fundamental Theology* [1981], 114–18, and *Jesus Our Redeemer*, 233.

⁴⁹ O’Collins, *Fundamental Theology* [1981], 115.

⁵⁰ CDF, *Dominus Iesus*, §15.

⁵¹ Martin, *Will Many be Saved?* 7.

and salvation.”⁵² It is one thing to say that some knowledge of God is possibly accessible to them even if they do not have full knowledge of the way of salvation. It is another to say that the knowledge they have *is* salvific. O’Collins wants to tie revelation and salvation closely together so that he can advance the salvific efficacy of all religions; hence his broad inclusivism. Why is that a problem? Because revelation is intended for salvation but does not necessarily entail it.

In the former case, that knowledge may be a preparation for the reception of the Gospel in Christ, who is the full revelation of God. O’Collins does make that point.⁵³ When he does he speaks of “their condition somehow leav[ing] them wounded, at a lower level, and imperfect.”⁵⁴ But he still regards that condition as a salvific condition, in particular, as “follow[ers] of other religions and receiv[ing] salvation through them.”⁵⁵ The problem with O’Collins’s view, in this connection, was already raised by James Heft, as I noted in my article review: “Once it is assumed that other believers can be saved through their own religions, how robust can the Christian’s proclamation of the ‘decisive revelation of God in Christ’ be?” In this connection, we have another problem. Romanus Cessario describes it well.

Before the Second Vatican Council, ecclesiastical authority cautioned against certain theological positions that threatened to confuse God’s creative presence to the human creature with the realization of the same person’s call to beatitude. The danger here is the risk of emphasizing the pervasive and inclusive character of divine grace in a way that practically eliminates the need for a real grace of justification—one that effectively transforms an impious person into a holy one. But the New Testament makes it exceedingly difficult to glide over the fact that the justification won by the blood of Christ really involves a movement from our being “by nature children of wrath like everyone else” to our being “alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved” (Eph 2:3, 5).⁵⁶

⁵² O’Collins, *The Second Vatican Council: Message and Meaning*, 119.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 137.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 138.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 137.

⁵⁶ Romanus Cessario, O.P., *Christian Faith & The Theological Life* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1996), 28–29.

O'Collins does confuse God's presence in general revelation to all men with the realization of their call to the supernatural destiny of eternal life. Given his understanding of the relationship of Christ as Mediator of Creation and Redemption, and hence Christ's role for salvation, he does emphasize the "pervasive and inclusive character of divine grace in a way that practically eliminates the need for a real grace of justification" for all men. That confusion stems not only from paying no systematic theological attention to resistance, and hence to distortion, misinterpretation, and rejection of the witness of general revelation, but also from the assumption that all grace is saving grace.

Sin and Grace

Consider, for example, O'Collins's correct claim that the Holy Spirit is the source of all that is revealed by God as the true, good, and beautiful outside the visible boundaries of the Church in various religions around the world. But again, O'Collins assumes that the response to the universal action of the Spirit in and through general revelation yields not only some inchoate knowledge of God but also salvation. He claims that, with this understanding of the Spirit's work, he stands in the trajectory of John Paul II's thought as expressed in his 1986 encyclical letter on the Holy Spirit, *Dominum et Vivificantem*. In one sense he does, because the Pope sees the Spirit of Truth always and everywhere active in God's plan of redemption that is mediated by the Holy Spirit. In this plan, "God has freely called all men and women to the supernatural destiny of eternal life." So, yes, O'Collins is right that all men are included in "God's project of salvation." The New Testament makes it quite clear that God's will and desire is that all men should be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth (2 Pet 3:9). As the last sentence of *Lumen Gentium* §13⁵⁷ puts it, "all men are called to salvation by the grace of God."⁵⁸ Therefore, in this connection, we

⁵⁷ O'Collins mistakenly claims in *Second Vatican Council: Message and Meaning*, 48, that this sentence is in *Lumen Gentium* §16 .

⁵⁸ On this, see Vatican II's *Nostra Aetate*, §1: "For all peoples comprise a single community, and have a single origin, since God made the whole race of men dwell over the entire face of the earth (cf. Acts 17:26). One also is their final goal: God. His providence, His manifestations of goodness, and His saving designs extend to all men (cf. Wis 8:1; Acts 14:17; Rom 2:6-7; 1 Tim 2:4) against the day when the elect will be united in that Holy City ablaze with the splendor of God, where the nations will walk in His light (cf. Rev 21:23f)" (accessed August 1, 2017, http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651028_nostra-aetate_en.html).

can understand that God draws all men to himself by the work of the Spirit through prevenient grace, which is mediated by the Holy Spirit. Thus, in the words of *Gaudium et Spes* §22: “For since Christ died for all, and since all men are in fact called to one and the same destiny, which is divine, we must hold that the Holy Spirit offers to all the possibility of being made partners, *in a way known to God alone*, in the paschal mystery.” Does this statement not best fit a position appropriately dubbed “opaque exclusivism”?⁵⁹—exclusivist because the saving work of Christ is ontologically and causally necessary for the salvation of human beings, but opaque because the realization of the possibility of salvation of the invincibly ignorant, to which the prevenient grace of God is mediated by the Holy Spirit, is left to God alone.

But, in another sense, O’Collins does not stand with John Paul,⁶⁰ because he inexplicably ignores John Paul’s emphasis that the “marvelous ‘condescension’ of the Spirit *meets with resistance and opposition* in our human reality.” In particular, he ignores the noetic effect of the fall into sin that St. Paul presents as “a debased mind” (Rom 1:28; 1 Tim 6:5), “alienated and hostile” (Col 1:21), a “fleshly mind” (Col 2:18; cf. Gal 5:19–21), and “a darkened understanding” (Eph 4:17–18). Against this background, we can understand what the Pope adds: “Unfortunately, the resistance to the Holy Spirit which Saint Paul emphasizes in the *interior and subjective dimension* as tension, struggle and rebellion taking place in the human heart finds in every period of history and especially in the modern era its *external dimension*, which takes concrete form as the content of culture and

⁵⁹ Paul Helm, “Are They Few That be Saved?” in *Universalism and the Doctrine of Hell*, ed. Nigel M. des Cameron (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1992), 257–81, at 277.

⁶⁰ O’Collins’s claim to find support in the thought of John Paul II suffers from selective quotation and is made without considering what the Pope says elsewhere on the subject in question. One example is John Paul on Islam. To get a fuller and more accurate vision of the theology of religions adumbrated in the Pope’s thought, and where Islam might fit into that theology, we must consider not only his 1985 address to young Muslims in Morocco (as O’Collins does), but also his 1987 Christmas address to the Roman Curia, his very important chapter on Islam in *Crossing the Threshold of Hope* (New York: Knopf, 1994), and his General Audience of Wednesday, May 5, 1999, §§2–3. In my article review, I tried to give a sense of the complex nature of John Paul II’s stance toward Islam, particularly with respect not only to the claim made by some that he unambiguously affirms that Muslims and Christians worship the same God but also to the claim that he affirms that Islam is a mediator of salvation—which he never says (pace O’Collins).

civilization, as a *philosophical system, an ideology, a program* for action and for the shaping of human behavior.”⁶¹ Thus, O'Collins overlooks sin's impact on the human mind's reception of general revelation. But there is also a problem with O'Collins's account of grace mediated by the Holy Spirit to all men.

The grace referred to in God's calling man to salvation is his prevenient grace through Jesus Christ, a preparatory grace, one that not only enables but also convicts, calls, and illumines man—but not without man's free response, and hence, the possibility of his rejection or resistance of that grace.⁶² The predisposing grace to which *Lumen Gentium* §13 is referring when it states that all men are called by God's grace to salvation comes from Christ and the Spirit and is such that it is offered to all men. But that does not say anything about this offer's saving efficacy and finality. “God calls men to be participants in his grace; by what means and with what effect is not here stated.”⁶³ Pace O'Collins, there is a basic difference between “offer” and “call,” on the one hand, and actuality of reception, on the other. Furthermore, the prevenient grace of God mediated by the Holy Spirit does not bypass the matter of whether it is consciously accepted or rejected, because man must freely assent to and cooperate with that grace in order to be justified in faith and sanctified in charity.⁶⁴

Furthermore, what is the nature of faith here that involves knowing or experiencing God through general revelation? O'Collins gives Romans 1:21 as his answer: faith “should lead human beings to ‘honor’ God and ‘give thanks to him.’” But this biblical reference will certainly not do at all to justify his claim that faith's knowledge of general revelation involves the recipient in “unconditional praise, worship, and obedience.” O'Collins selectively quotes here without regard to the context in which these phrases occur. The epistemic contact (“having known God”) with general revelation is necessary in order to render man without excuse in resisting the evidence of general revelation—“they do not glorify him as God.” If anything, St. Paul puts the emphasis on resisting and suppressing the manifestation of God given in the visible creation that results in

⁶¹ John Paul II, *Dominum et Vivificantem* (1986), §§55, 56, and 4.

⁶² Council of Trent, Decree on Justification (Denzinger, *Compendium*, nos. 1525 and 1553). CCC §2001.

⁶³ Mikka Ruokanen, *The Catholic Doctrine of Non-Christian Religions According to the Second Vatican Council* (Leiden: Brill, 1992), 85.

⁶⁴ CCC §2001.

their thoughts become futile and their foolish hearts darkened (Rom 1:21).⁶⁵ Therefore, such knowledge fails to lead to a true knowledge and acknowledgement of God. That is precisely what St. Paul teaches when he says, “For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened.” It is in this connection that we should understand the significance of the last paragraph of *Lumen Gentium* §16:

But very often [*at saepius*] men, deceived by the Evil One, have become vain in their reasonings, have exchanged the truth of God for a lie and served the world rather than the Creator. Or else, living and dying in this world without God, they are exposed to ultimate despair. Wherefore to promote the glory of God and procure the salvation of all of these, and mindful of the command of the Lord, “Preach the Gospel to every creature” (Mark 16:16), the Church fosters the missions with care and attention.⁶⁶

So, although we must keep one eye on the Church’s assertions that “all men are called to salvation by the grace of God” (*Lumen Gentium* §13) and that the prevenient grace of God is mediated by the Holy Spirit to all men in a manner known only to him (*Gaudium et Spes* §22), our other eye must be kept on the passage from *Lumen Gentium* §16 because it tempers the salvation optimism of a broad inclusivism, not to mention universalism, that is dominant in our culture. Ralph Martin is right that we need to consider “the pervasive scriptural testimony . . . to the deeply ingrained tendency of a fallen race to resist interior illumination and/or the explicit preaching of the gospel, because they

⁶⁵ Thirty years earlier, O’Collins did make this very point regarding Romans 1:18ff.: “In fact men have failed *vis-à-vis* this [general] revelation offered them in creation, and it is on the failure rather than the opportunity that Paul’s emphasis lies in Romans 1. Although God is recognizable, men did not acknowledge honour and thank him, but tried to live from themselves and their own achievement. They despised and falsified the truth about God’s power and nature which was there to be acknowledged in the created world” (*Theology and Revelation* [Notre Dame, IN: Fides, 1968], 35; see further 6–62, esp. 34–38). I have never found this point made again by O’Collins in any of the sources I have read.

⁶⁶ There are similar passages in *Gaudium et Spes* §22, *Ad Gentes* §9, and *Nostra Aetate*, §§2–4.

prefer, as Scripture says, the darkness to the light.”⁶⁷ In other words, “the Council clearly acknowledges the possibility that those who have never heard the gospel may, under certain conditions, be saved. But it immediately goes on to state that ‘very often’ (*at saepius*) these conditions are not met and that the salvation of non-Christians who do not meet these conditions is significantly tied to the gospel being effectively preached to them.”⁶⁸ *Lumen Gentium* §16 cites Romans 1:21 and 25 in biblical support of its claim that, although God has made known to all men his existence, eternal power, and divine nature in and through the things he has made, confronting all men with the light of general revelation, they stifle and nullify—obliterate, even if not totally—its testimony by their active contrary will. This contrary will is, according to Romans, “the natural condition of the human heart after the Fall”—namely, “self-seeking, rebellious, and prone to deception, idolatry, and immorality.”⁶⁹ Thus, their response is to that light of general revelation given through creation and conscience, and they are judged on the basis of the truth that has been made available to them in and through that revelation by God’s grace.

**“In Him Was Life, and the Life Was the Light of All Men”
(John 1:4)**

Throughout his book, O’Collins cites *Nostra Aetate* §2, which speaks of those things in other religions that are “true and holy” and reflect a “ray of that Truth, which enlightens all human beings.” O’Collins comments: “Even if the text included no explicit [biblical] reference, it obviously echoed the language of the Johannine prologue about the Word being ‘the light of human beings’ (John 1:4), ‘the true light that enlightens everyone’ (John 1:9).” Elsewhere, he says: “This article of *Nostra Aetate* does not expressly state that Christ is both universal Revealer and universal Savior, but what it says amounts to that. How can he ‘illuminate’ all human beings without conveying to them something of God’s self-revelation and hence also the offer of salvation?”⁷⁰ And again, he says: “The *light* of revelation brings the *life* of salvation, and vice versa.”⁷¹ But, here too, O’Collins ignores that the human reception of that light is open to resistance and, hence, to distortion,

⁶⁷ Martin, *Will Many Be Saved?* 56.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 58.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 89.

⁷⁰ O’Collins, *The Second Vatican Council: Message and Meaning*, 116 (see also 56 and 122).

⁷¹ Ibid., 13.

misinterpretation, and rejection. Thus, the *offer* of salvation, or being *called* to salvation by God's grace (*Lumen Gentium* §13), is one thing, and the actuality of reception is another. But O'Collins assumes that the response to that light is positive, paying absolutely no attention to the difference between the offer, or calling, and its efficacy and finality. Reformed biblical theologian Herman Ridderbos rightly notes that John 1:9 "describes light in its fullness and universality." But, he adds, "it does not say that every individual is in fact enlightened by the light."⁷² Pace O'Collins, therefore, the Word does not illuminate all human beings, because they *resist* the light. Consider John 1:5 and 10: "And the light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not understood it. . . . He was in the world, and the world was made through Him, and the world did not know Him." Both of these verses speak "of the negative reaction of the world to the coming of the light." Methodist biblical theologian Ben Witherington, III, explains: "The darkness the author talks about is . . . a spiritual darkness that involves not only ignorance of the truth but also moral darkness and fallenness, which lead one to reject the light and life even when they are offered. Thus our author

⁷² Herman Ridderbos, *The Gospel of John: A Theological Commentary*, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997 [1987]), 43. See also Francis Martin and William M. Wright IV, *The Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2015), on vv. 10–11: "The Light, which was in the world, is the divine Word through which the world was made. However, the world preferred to ignore the Light: the world did not know him. As St. Paul writes in Rom 1:18, human beings, despite the witness to God in creation, 'in their wickedness suppress the truth'" (36). See also William Grossouw, *Revelation and Redemption: An Introduction to the Theology of St. John*, trans. and ed. Rev. Martin W. Schoenberg, O.S.C. (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1965), 29–30: "This is the great event [Incarnation] in history which St. John contemplates with respectful astonishment and loving gratitude: the plenitude of divine Life and Light has come forth from the bosom of the divinity . . . and has appeared among us in the person of Jesus Christ." O'Collins, of course, heartily affirms this truth, but missing from his account is man's resistant response to the Light. Grossouw adds: "Almost as great is the tremendous and incomprehensible tragedy of the world: 'the world knew him not,' for from the very beginning the darkness has been opposed to the Light (1:5 ff.). John rears his concept of the world on a great antithesis; his history is a drama. The darkness consists in the denial and overthrow of divine revelation. Just as the Light is the manifestation of the divine truth, so the darkness is a futile but terrible attempt to blot out the operation of the Light. The stage of this struggle is the spirit of man. With painful bewilderment St. John observes that the majority of men shun the Light. The world did not receive Him (1:5) and His own rejected Him (1:11). Men have loved the darkness rather the Light (3:19)" (ibid.). One sees nothing of this struggle in O'Collins's theology of religions.

wishes to stress the ultimate irony of this all. The creatures reject their own creator when they reject the Son of God.”⁷³ Catholic biblical theologian Rudolph Schnackenberg agrees:

The Logos was not just the fundamental and universal principle of light in the divine plan: he also illumined the existence and way of man from within the historical reality of man's environment or “world.” “He was in the world,” so close to men that they could reach him and cleave to him for their salvation; but the “world,” that is, humanity installed in its earthly, historical home, “did not know him.” This is the brutal and shattering fact, which the hymn signals in a few short words, and re-iterates more poignantly in the following verse (v. 11). Thus the hymn pursues, of set purpose, the thought of the second strophe, the relationship of the Logos to mankind, but depicts the tragic breach in the historical course of the relationship.⁷⁴

In sum, says Ridderbos insightfully:

All this means, then, that what is said about the Logos in vss. 1–4 is directly applied to what one can call the great content of this Gospel, that is, to Christ's appearance as the light of the world in its confrontation with the darkness (cf. 8:12; 3:19f.; 9:5; 12:35, all passages in which the core concept of 1:4, 5 [and 10] return). For that reason it is not permissible to end the first cycle of ideas, the Word in the beginning and so on, at vs. 4. All the imperfect verbs in vss. 1–4 that describe the preexistence and essence of the Word that was antecedent to all existence and experience have their point and meaning in that they reveal the grand background of the actual situation of proclamation in which the Evangelist and the Christian community know themselves to be: “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not understood it.”⁷⁵

⁷³ Ben Witherington, III, *John's Wisdom, A Commentary on the Fourth Gospel* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 55.

⁷⁴ Rudolph Schnackenberg, *The Gospel According to St John*, vol. 1, *Introduction and Commentary on Chapters 1–4*, trans. Kevin Smyth (New York: Herder and Herder, 1968), 255–56.

⁷⁵ Ridderbos, *Gospel of John*, 40. Schnackenberg agrees: “Man is called on to make his own active decision (of faith), but that he did not ‘lay hold’ of it when it was within his grasp” (*Gospel According to St John*, 246).

Furthermore, the purpose of the Gospel of John was “to trace the gospel story to its final and deepest origins and so—taking up the conflict between what he will refer to over and over as darkness and lies versus truth and light—to point out at the outset the importance range of what he is about to narrate and the grounds on which he will call people to believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God (20:31).”⁷⁶ O’Collins overlooks that the human reception of that light is open to resistance and, hence, to distortion, misinterpretation, and rejection. Put differently, he overlooks the place of sin that is at the root of man’s resistance. This results in a salvation optimism—a mentality that slides from the proper emphasis of Vatican II, as Martin puts it: “[sliding from] the *possibility* of some being saved without hearing the gospel to the *probability* or even certainty that all or almost all will be saved without hearing the gospel.”⁷⁷

What Is the Relationship between Christ, the Church, and the Kingdom of God?

Consider the third group of objections (4, 5 and 10), which focus on the question regarding the relationship between Christ, the Church, and the Kingdom of God. I did not contest O’Collins’s view that the Church is in service to the Kingdom of God. On this point we agree. Yes, the Kingdom of God is broader than the Church, with the latter being in service to the former. For, the Kingdom of God is the plan of God that is realized in and through Christ, encompassing the whole of creation. In my view, and arguably the view of the Second Vatican Council and John Paul II, the Kingdom of God is not identical with the Church because the realization of that Kingdom is an enactment of the great divine work of redemption in its recapitulation—fulfillment and consummation—of all the fallen creation in Christ. “In a word,” as John Paul II wrote, “the Kingdom of God is the manifestation and the realization of God’s plan of salvation in all its fullness” (*Redemptoris Missio* [1990] §15). “In all its fullness,” I would say along with Yves Congar, refers to the restoration or renewal of creation “in the redemptive plan and in the redemptive power of Jesus Christ.”⁷⁸ That

⁷⁶ Ridderbos, *Gospel of John*, 40.

⁷⁷ Martin, *Will Many be Saved?* 17 (emphasis added).

⁷⁸ Congar, *Jesus Christ*, 176. See also the entire chapter of Congar’s book entitled “The Lordship of Christ over the Church and the World” (pp. 167–219). This is also the view expressed in Pontifical Council for Culture, *Towards a Pastoral Approach to Culture*.

this, too, is the teaching of the Council is clear from its understanding regarding the vocation of the laity,⁷⁹ the relation between Christ and culture,⁸⁰ and the cosmic significance of Christ in creation and redemption.⁸¹

What I contested is O'Collins's view of John Paul II—namely, that, in the Pope's view, “the Church serves the Kingdom of God and not vice versa.” O'Collins makes a similar objection—contested by me as well—when he says that “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.” I will treat these objections together. In response, O'Collins says that he agrees with John Paul that the Kingdom of God is present in a special way in the Church, but that is not to say that the former serves the Church. This response misses the point that John Paul makes about the relationship between the Kingdom of God and the Church, and which I emphasized in my article review—but which O'Collins mostly ignores—namely, “while remaining distinct from Christ and the Kingdom, the Church is indissolubly united to both” (ibid., §18). What does O'Collins mean by the Kingdom “being present in” the Church? He does not say. But John Paul does.

According to the Pope, the redemptive purpose of the Kingdom of God, as far as humanity is concerned, is the Church. John Paul says in, “Christ endowed the Church, his body, with the fullness of the benefits and means of salvation” (ibid.). This fullness of the Church “confers upon her a specific and necessary role,” as well as a “special connection with the Kingdom of God and Christ, which she ‘has the mission of announcing and inaugurating among all people’” (ibid.). Furthermore, the Church's “specific and necessary role,” adds John Paul, her “special connection with the Kingdom of God and of Christ,” is “seen especially in her preaching, which is call to conversion” (ibid., §20). “The proclamation of the word of God has *Christian conversion* as its aim: a complete and sincere adherence to Christ and his Gospel through faith” (ibid., §46). Therefore, “proclamation is the permanent priority of mission” (ibid., §44), with the corresponding call to conversion. In this light, we can understand

⁷⁹ *Lumen Gentium* §31, but see also §36. For a fuller development of the Church's teaching on the mission of the laity, see Vatican II, *Apostolicam Actuositatem* (Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity).

⁸⁰ *Gaudium et Spes* §58.

⁸¹ Ibid., §45.

why humanity has no other goal than to belong to this Church, the Body of Christ, in which all is fulfilled (see Eph 1:22–23).⁸²

Ad Gentes §7 makes this very point: “Therefore, all must be converted to Him as He is made known by the Church’s preaching. *All must be incorporated into Him by baptism, and into the Church which is His body.* For Christ Himself ‘in explicit terms . . . 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’ [*Lumen Gentium* §14]” (emphasis added). Indeed, *Dei Verbum* §8 teaches that the eschatological dimension of God’s self-revelation is such that “the Church constantly moves toward the fullness of divine truth until the words of God reach their complete fulfillment in *her*” (emphasis added). What words of God?—that we have been redeemed by the blood of Christ “out of every tribe and tongue and people and nation” (Rev: 5:9). That is, “that a great multitude which no one could number, of all nations, tribes, peoples, and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed with white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, saying ‘Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb’” (Rev 7: 9). Therefore, in this light, we can understand why “all men are called to belong to the new People of God” (*Lumen Gentium* §13), the Church, the new and reborn humanity that finds its unity no longer in Adam but in Christ, but also why we read in *Lumen Gentium* §2 that God’s plan is “to assemble in the holy Church all those who would believe in Christ.” In this connection, according to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* §769: “The Church, and through her will . . . ‘all the just from the time of Adam, “from Abel, the just one, to the last of the elect,” . . . be gathered together in the universal Church in the Father’s presence,”” And again, telling us exactly why the Kingdom of God is in service to the Church, the CCC says: “To reunite all his children, scattered and led astray by sin, the Father willed to call the whole of humanity together into his Son’s Church. *The Church is the place where humanity must rediscover its unity and salvation.* The Church is ‘the world reconciled’” (CCC §845; emphasis added). Finally: “This characteristic of universality which adorns the People of God is a gift from the Lord Himself. By reason of it,

⁸² Aloys Grillmeier, “Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, Chapter 1, Mystery of the Church,” in *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*, vol. 1, trans. Lalit Adolphus et al. (New York: Herder and Herder, 1967), 140.

the Catholic Church strives energetically and constantly to bring all humanity with all its riches back to Christ its Head in the unity of His Spirit" (*Lumen Gentium* §13).

So, pace O'Collins, I think we do want to say, in light of the teachings, not only of Vatican II but also of John Paul II, that the Spirit, therefore, serves the Church in order to realize the redemptive goal of humanity in Christ. The CCC §760 makes this very point:

Christians of the first centuries said, "The world was created for the sake of the Church." God created the world for the sake of communion with his divine life, a communion brought about by the "convocation" of men in Christ, and this "convocation" is the Church. The Church is the goal of all things, and God permitted such painful upheavals as the angels' fall and man's sin only as occasions and means for displaying all the power of his arm and the whole measure of the love he wanted to give the world. Just as God's will is creation and is called "the world," so the intention of the salvation of men, and it is called "the Church."

Yes, the Church's mission is to proclaim the Gospel in light of Jesus's life, ministry, death, resurrection, ascension, and sending of the Holy Spirit, as O'Collins rightly says, but the redemptive purpose of that mission is to call the whole of humanity together into the Church. "*The Church is the place where humanity must rediscover its unity and salvation.*" As I said in my article review: "Since the Church is the new reborn humanity in Christ, the Kingdom of God serves the Church by virtue of humanity having no other goal than indwelling in this Church, the Body of Christ, in which all is fulfilled with Christ as its head."⁸³ This conviction, reiterated by *Lumen Gentium* §14, should surprise no one, since the necessity of faith, baptism, and the Church for salvation is a *de fide* teaching.⁸⁴ N&V

⁸³ Echeverria, "Vatican II on the Religions," 849.

⁸⁴ I am grateful to Fr. Thomas Guarino, Professor of Systematic Theology at Seton Hall University, for his comments that helped me to improve on some formulations in this article.