

A Gordian Knot

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FROM PLUTARCH'S DEFENSE of Alexander¹ down to Leibniz² and Sartre, there has long been a well-founded disdain for the "abrupt, rather barbaric fashion of cutting Gordian knots rather than trying to untie them."³ To untangle the dogwood fibers of the famous knot that had immobilized the wagon dedicated to God and left in front of the royal residence at Gordium would require, we are told, first identifying where the fibers begin and to where they all lead, which is not at all evident even to a persistent outside observer. The Christian theology of non-Christian religions before and after the Second Vatican Council is a paradigm of such a Gordian knot. In his new study, *Vatican II: Catholic Doctrines on Jews and Muslims* (New York, Oxford University Press 2014), Gavin D'Costa has succeeded in unravelling many, but by no means all, of the threads preventing a well-reasoned advance in the Catholic theology of religions.

D'Costa begins with a convincing critique of those who would cut Vatican II itself in two by their allowing as normative only texts in continuity or only texts in discontinuity with pre-conciliar theological or magisterial teachings. Somewhat less lucidly, D'Costa identifies

¹ Plutarch, *Alexander* 18 (relying here on Aristobulos to exonerate Alexander).

² In his opusculum *On Nature in Itself or On the Power and Dynamic Activity Residing in Created Things*, G.W. Leibniz uses the image to criticize the neglect of philosophically mediated theology.

³ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, pt. III, ch. 1, no. III ("Husserl, Hegel, Heidegger"), trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Washington Square Press, 1992), 330.

three (actually four) general *misinterpretations* of the Council that fail in one way or another to be genuinely synthetic:

1. Those who, while claiming to be historical, emphasize the discontinuity or even rupture at the Council and embrace it alone are D'Costa's type 1, although he might well have noted that the decision to respect only one side of the historically established diversity within the conciliar agreements is—to use D'Costa's terms—not historically but theologically motivated.⁴
2. Those who bewail that the Council (or its post-conciliar papal reception) did not change enough in the timely fashion needed to be of use today are D'Costa's "type 4," the type he did not elaborate further by D'Costa, despite the fact that some of the loudest voices calling for a new aggressive factionalism and a return to the active battle-lines of the 1960s and 1970s in theological and ecclesial institutions and for a well-orchestrated Vatican III (an acknowledgement of their disappointment in the real Vatican II and its reception) are arguably of this type⁵, which shares common ground with his type 1.
3. Those who, while considering themselves theological, claim that neither councils nor popes legitimately can change or introduce doctrines are D'Costa's "type," and those who say that the Council acknowledged this fact (and thus merely reformulated established positions for pastoral purposes) are a subset, "type 2a."

⁴ At various points, D'Costa distinguishes theology from what is practical or pragmatic (89, 99) from the historical (43, among others), the canonical (97), the phenomenological (160), and (as we will discuss below), from the magisterium. None of these distinctions is without a *fundamentum in re*, but without further nuance, they imply a notion of systematic theology divorced from many of the accepted *loci theologici*. For a congenial counterproposal, cf. the sense of theology with its many subdisciplines as a potential whole in Francisco P. Muniz, *The Work of Theology* (Washington, DC: Thomist Press, 1958). Even outside the theological context, historians are guided by non-historical presuppositions.

⁵ As a characteristic example of a plea for renewed factionalism, see Massimo Faggioli, *Vatican II: The Battle for Meaning* (New York: Paulist Press, 2012), discussed by D'Costa, e.g., 53.

4. Finally, those who complain that the Council did not acknowledge this, making the Council and its papal development non-normative at best, or even illegitimate, form the subset “type 2b.”

D’Costa is most convincing on the principles of his interpretation when he aligns himself with a “hermeneutic of reform” that he labels his “type 3” as the only sensible direction of interpretative strategies, an intentional synthesis of moments of continuity and discontinuity somewhat along the lines of Pop Benedict XVI’s suggestions in 2005 for a hermeneutic of reform in reading and developing the conciliar documents. Unlike Benedict and his best readers, including Cardinal Kurt Koch,⁶ D’Costa identifies an interpretative strategy that sees in the Council merely a synthesis between doctrinal continuity and non-doctrinal, cultural-contextual discontinuity: “This type argue(s) that there is doctrinal continuity, and many forms of discontinuity—but never regarding authoritative doctrinal teachings. These discontinuous elements are related to the reform of the Church, or the Church operating in new contexts and conditions” (D’Costa, 17). But this sounds closer to D’Costa’s type 2a. His intention in portraying it as the all-too-faint beginning of a genuine alternative seems to be his understandable insistence on excluding the possibility of licit contradictions at the more profound levels of genuine expressions of faith, even while—with Ratzinger/Benedict and Koch—openly insisting on the necessity of true doctrinal development. He admits that this type 3 is at its best (his “type 3b”) when it moves beyond what he terms “type 3a,” mere critique of type 1 (from which D’Costa himself cogently shows how much can be learned), and into a clearer affirmation of doctrinal development than in type 2a.

Given the negotiated and voted upon character of the conciliar documents, the variations on D’Costa’s type 3 share a common feature: they represent the only option among the five types listed to respect the maxim *pacta sunt servanda*. An abstraction of the *desiderata* of just one “party” to the agreements would violate the principles of fairness, plurality, and liberality rhetorically praised at least by type 1, imposing a closed shop on discussions and on the institutions designed to promote them. By contrast, and as a performative confirmation of his position, D’Costa is able to use literature productively, as well

⁶ Pope Benedict XVI, Kurt Koch, et al., *Das Zweite Vatikanische Konzil: Die Hermeneutik der Reform* (Augsburg: St. Ulrich, 2012).

as ideas drawn from representatives of all the interpretative options listed, even while forging his own alternative to most of them. His position actually deserves to be called “capable of dialogue.”

Some of the still tangled strings of the Gordian knot left unravelled by D’Costa are grouped around these questions of doctrinal development in general, questions exemplified but not restricted to conciliar shifts in attitudes towards non-Christian religions. I will name only two such tangles. First, D’Costa seems to embrace the general direction of J. H. Newman’s sense of genuine doctrinal development⁷ (which D’Costa plausibly finds compatible with conciliar renaissance, shown in Newman’s own return to early Church history to judge later ecclesial developments), even while passing over most of Newman’s conceptualizations and analyses. Where Newman settled for a vague description of the relationship between unchanging but less clearly thematized principles and the expressed doctrines needing to be developed in order to keep such principles constant and vital⁸, D’Costa appeals to the handbook schematic of graded propositions⁹. The still inadequate scholarship available on the pre-modern history of the theology of non-Christian religions suggests that those abiding principles are most evident in the unchanging refusal of the Church to settle for statements that, if taken alone, would result in a theological position that one could well describe in its entirety as exclusivist, inclusivist, pluralist, or apophatic (terms whose meaning D’Costa had helped to clarify in earlier works). By different argumentative means, D’Costa reaffirms this basic conciliar insight in the end: Religions are complex realities that call for differentiated judgments and that allow neither unqualified praise or exclusive critique.

Second, D’Costa seems to make too much of the undoubtedly important categorial distinction between magisterium (episcopal, papal, and conciliar) and theology. That a casual remark by Pope Gregory VII in 1076, even if cited by *Nostre Aetate* 3, becomes a document of the magisterium of greater weight than explicit theological consensus seems obviously doubtful (see D’Costa, 205–08). But even a more solemn pronouncement, such as that of the Council of Florence in 1442 (see D’Costa, 62–64, 154–156), will need to be

⁷ John Henry Newman, *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989).

⁸ *Ibid.*, pt. II, ch. 7 (pp. 323–55).

⁹ D’Costa abbreviates *sententia* as *sentia* throughout his work (e.g., 14–15, 143, 214–16); cf. the repetitive anomalies at 50n98, 102, 110, 158, 214.

contextualized in light of the broad theological consensus that, at least in its apparent meaning, it contradicts. If the definition of doctrine is largely a magisterial task, then a development of doctrine will not exclude a development of magisterial teaching. D'Costa seems, in the end, to understand soberly, but also to accept and celebrate, the doctrinal developments of the Council on non-Christian religions, but he lags behind in connecting within the magisterium the continuity of principles with its own shifts in doctrinal statements.

Admittedly, these two larger, more general questions of doctrinal development are ongoing *quaestiones disputandae*, and it would be unfair to expect an author to solve them in the margins of a work on the theology of religions. D'Costa is nonetheless right to raise them here, as the conciliar developments on religions provide them with what is arguably their most challenging test-case. The adjudication of the questions of continuity and discontinuity in the theology of religions is made even more difficult by an anomaly in present-day theological scholarship: while it is widely accepted that there can be no successful systematic reflection without historical preparation, and although it is widely accepted that the interrelationship of religions belongs to the most urgent and basic themes of systematic theology (and not just today), the present state of the history of the Christian theology of non-Christian religions is at best fragmentary, most often rudimentary. This stems in part from the fragmentary nature of the question in patristic and medieval sources. Statements touching on the relationship to non-Christian religions abound in theological works of all kinds (systematic, exegetical, historical, pastoral, and canonical), but they are rarely united into a single treatise and, thus, never lead to the kind of school-formation censure and defense that accompanied many of the most valued themes of Christian theology and, eventually, magisterial pronouncements.

In his important second chapter, D'Costa points to a few of the pre-modern themes reflected in the Council's development of them, most notably: implicit faith, Christ as the head of all humanity, and invincible ignorance. The significant work begun on these themes, like Georg Hoffmann's *Die Lehre von der Fides implicita innerhalb der katholischen Kirche* (Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1903) or Max Seckler's 1974 essay on Thomas Aquinas's theology of Christ as "caput omnium hominum,"¹⁰ deserves to be taken up again and expanded. D'Cos-

¹⁰ Max Seckler, "Das Haupt aller Menschen: Zur Auslegung eines Thomastextes," in *Virtus politica: Festgabe zum 75 Geburtstag von Alfons Hufnagel*, ed.

ta's work on religions, including this newest study, help prepare the systematic expectations of differentiated answers offered by older theologies of religions. Without such solid systematic expectations, historical research would be blind. Without the historical narrative, systematic attempts today remain empty. D'Costa cannot be said to have accomplished this synthesis, but he has removed several of the most serious obstacles to it.

D'Costa concretizes his sense of a general approach to questions of inter-religious relationality in chapters 3 and 4 with selected themes drawn from the Council's statements about Judaism and Islam. Drawing on and developing the historical research of the last fifteen years, he is keen to read the documents of the Council in terms both of the genesis of each and the interrelatedness of the entire final corpus, and he is careful to note issues on which the Council intentionally left questions open for future theological discussion (summarized again in brief theses in ch. 5 and including, by D'Costa's account, several of the vexed questions of lived covenant and supersessionism). He heeds his own recommendation (D'Costa, 217) for the synthetic combination of caution, imagination, and adventure and welcomes the openings to this inter-religious pursuit that the Council's affirmation of *nova et vetera* made possible.

Noting the universal soteriological significance of Christ for all humankind, and seeing the general motivation for proclaiming Christ to every human being, D'Costa refers more than once to reasons alluded to at the Council that might lead to a legitimately differentiated attitude toward mission. His work appeared too soon to benefit from the December 2015 document of the Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, which justifies just such abstinence from "institutional mission work" (but not from witness of other kinds) by reference to the exceptional place held by Judaism among non-Christian religions.¹¹ D'Costa's work prior to this study included one of

Joseph Müller and Helmut Kohlenberger (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 1974), 107–25, later published as Seckler, *Die schiefen Wände des Lehrhauses: Katholizität als Herausforderung* (Freiburg: Herder, 1988), 26–39.

¹¹ "The Gifts and the Calling of God Are Irrevocable" (Rom 11:29): A Reflection on Theological Questions Pertaining to Catholic-Jewish Relations on the Occasion of the 80th Anniversary of Nostra Aetate (no. 4), §40: "In concrete terms this means that the Catholic Church neither conducts nor supports any specific institutional mission work directed towards Jews. While there is a principled rejection of an institutional Jewish mission, Christians are nonetheless called to bear witness to their faith in Jesus Christ also to Jews, although they should do so in

the first critiques from a former adherent of the pluralistic theory of religions (in all its many iterations, always “a crossing of the Rubicon” that involves the denial of the universal soteriological significance of Christ). It was one of the weaknesses of those theories that it could recognize no special significance in contemporary Judaism. This position of the commission, well explained at the presentation of the document by its then-president, and president of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity as well, Cardinal Kurt Koch, runs contrary to the argumentative goal of some passages of D’Costa’s book, but it represents a continuation of his critique of pluralistic theories and a concretization of the exceptions for which, as he says repeatedly, the Council had reserved a place. Given the restriction of his discussion of Islam to the single question of the idea of God in Islam and Christianity, D’Costa does not take up the question of nuances surrounding the mission to Islam, particularly among the new Muslim immigrants to Europe.

The legend of Alexander and the Gordian knot included the oracle that whoever untied it would find the gate open to all of Asia. D’Costa chose in this book to focus on the interpretational strategies for reading the Council, on religion in general, and on the religions associated with Abraham. To deal with the other two religions named by *Nostra Aetate*, Buddhism and Hinduism, would require, D’Costa tells us, a further study (D’Costa, 5). Given the achievement of this book, but also the questions yet to be unravelled, he should be encouraged to continue his work. N.V

a humble and sensitive manner, acknowledging that Jews are bearers of God’s Word, and particularly in view of the great tragedy of the Shoah” (available at http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/relations-jews-docs/rc_pc_chrstuni_doc_20151210_ebraismo-nostra-aetate_en.html).

