

**The Engagement of Catholics with Other Faith Traditions
in the Post-Vatican II World**
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Introduction

Because the Catholic Church sees itself as the Church founded by Jesus Christ and believes that it is through Christ that salvation comes, it views itself as the instrument of salvation for all of humanity. The Church refers to itself as the “universal sacrament of salvation” or as having “the fullness of the means of salvation,” believing it possesses the “fullest deposit of faith,” a term that refers to the entirety of the revelation of Jesus Christ as passed through successive generations.

What exactly that means has changed over the years. In 1442, Pope Eugene IV’s papal bull *Cantate Domino* expressed in no uncertain terms that

[The sacrosanct Roman Church] believes, professes, and proclaims that those not living within the Catholic Church, not only pagans, but also Jews and heretics and schismatics cannot become participants in eternal life, but will depart “into everlasting fire which was prepared for the devil and his angels” [Matt. 25:41], unless before the end of life the same have been added to the flock; and that the unity of the ecclesiastical body is so strong that only to those remaining in it are the sacraments of the Church of benefit for salvation, and do fastings, almsgiving, and other functions of piety and exercises of Christian service produce eternal reward, and that no one, whatever almsgiving he has practiced, even if he has shed blood for the name of Christ, can be saved, unless he has remained in the bosom and unity of the Catholic Church.

This exclusivist position did not begin in the 15th Century. As early as the third century, Origen preached “Let no one fool himself; outside of this house, i.e. outside of the Church, no one is saved; for if someone goes outside, he becomes responsible for his

own death.” And in the fourth century, Augustine claimed the Jewish people were cursed and relegated to eternal damnation.

For centuries, Catholics believed that not only pagans and Jews, but even non-Catholic Christians would go to hell. This belief persisted despite the fact that the First Vatican Council seemed to open the door for the salvation of those who are “invincibly ignorant of Christ and the Church.” (As an aside, this belief was reciprocated by the belief by many Protestants that Catholics were all going to hell. To this day there are Protestants who do not know that Catholics are Christians.)

The view expressed in *Cantate Domino*, repeated in various ways over the years, led to an insular attitude among Catholics, as well as a fear of anything having to do with other faith traditions. (It may be that, in the United States at least, this was fueled by discrimination Catholic faced from Protestants as they emigrated to this country, leading to the same insularity.) Catholics of my generation and the generations that preceded it grew up with virtually no knowledge of other faith traditions – including other Christian traditions; I was in high school before I even met anyone who was not Catholic or Jewish.

Concerned as it was with dialogue between the Church and the outside world, Vatican II radically changed relations between Catholics and followers of other religions (Christian and non-Christian). Catholics in the post-Vatican II era have benefitted greatly from the ability to engage with and learn from non-Catholics in a freer manner. The goal of such engagement has *not* been to suggest that all religions are the same or to avoid discussions of their differences. Rather, the aim has been to explore areas where people of different faiths can learn from each other in a way that allows everyone to deepen his

or her own faith, to better understand those of other faiths, and to promote greater cooperation with people of other faith traditions in seeking to establish a more just society. So there are both individual and communal goals here.

I'd like to do two things in my talk. First, I'll speak a little bit about the paradigm shift created by the Second Vatican Council. (Although my focus is on *Gaudium et Spes* and some of the other Vatican II documents, I don't mean to discount the efforts made in the period leading up to the council by people like Yves Congar and others.) Then I will talk about the value to Catholics and non-Catholics of the inter-faith dialogue and interspirituality that have resulted from the increased freedom granted by Vatican II for Catholicism to engage with other faith traditions, focusing particularly on the engagement of Christians with non-Christian. My comments on that subject draw on both my academic interest in inter-faith dialogue and my personal experience, first as someone returning to Catholicism after spending twenty years practicing Buddhism, and second, as a spiritual director and retreat leader working with people whose spiritual practice incorporate elements from multiple faith traditions.

Vatican II

Gaudium et Spes addressed the desirability of engaging in dialogue with non-Catholics. It spoke not only of Christians not yet living in full communion with the Catholic Church, but of all “who preserve in their traditions precious elements of religion and humanity: and those “who cultivate beautiful qualities of the human spirit, but do not yet acknowledge the Source of those qualities.” The document speaks of wanting “frank conversations to compel us all to receive the inspiration of the Spirit,” emphasizing that those conversations, “which can lead to truth through love alone,” exclude no one. (¶92)

Consistent with that spirit, *Gaudium et Spes* addresses itself “not only to the sons of the Church and to all who invoke the name of Christ, but to the whole of humanity.” And when it speaks of Christ as the new man (as it does in ¶22), it speaks of Jesus as uniting himself with “every man,” and suggests that “this holds true not only for Christians, but for all men of good will in whose hearts grace works in unseen ways.” And, in language very different from the words of *Cantate Domino* which I quoted at the outset, the document reads, “since Christ died for all men, and since the ultimate vocation of man is in fact one and divine, we ought to believe that the Holy Spirit in a manner known only to God offers to every man the possibility of being associated with this paschal mystery.”

Thus, the Church now acknowledge that, through ways known only to God and not to humans, Christ may make Himself known to non-Christians in a way that allows for their salvation. This is reflected in Karl Rahner’s notion of the “anonymous Christian,” the idea that non-Christians can accept God’s grace through Christ even if they never heard of Christ. Although we can’t understand the ways of God here, Rahner’s idea was that Christ and the Holy Spirit operate even where the non-Christian is not conscious of it. (Several documents of the Second Vatican Council, most notably *Lumen Gentium* and *Nostra Aetate*, reflect Rahner’s influence and contain similar expressions.)

Similarly, in its 2000 declaration, *Dominus Iesus*, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith spoke of those non-Christians who possess “a grace which, while having a mysterious relationship to the Church, does not make them formally part of the

Church, but enlightens them in a way which is accommodated to their spiritual and material situation.”

Although non-Christians can be the recipients of God’s salvific grace, the corollary of the Catholic Church’s view that it is the instrument of salvation for all people is that those who follow other faith traditions are, in the words of *Dominus Iesus*, in a “gravely deficient situation” compared to Catholics. The Church expressly and consistently rejects any form of relativism that claims that any religion is as good as any other, more specifically, that any other religion is as good as Catholicism.

Nonetheless, the Catholic Church does not reject as false everything that comes from other religions. *Nostra Aetate*, another important document of Vatican II, the 1965 declaration on the relation of the Catholic Church to non-Christian religions, acknowledged that there is much that is “true and holy” in the precepts and teachings of other religions and that the Church “regards with sincere reverence those ways of conduct and of life, those precepts and teachings which, though differing in many aspects from the ones she holds and sets forth, nonetheless often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men.” The USCCB reaffirmed this idea in its recent *Dialogue with Muslims Committee Statement*, which speaks of “an openness to receive intimations of truth wherever it is found in other traditions, including Islam.”

Consistent with the spirit of *Nostra Aetate*, which states that the Church urges its members to “enter with prudence and charity into discussion and collaboration with members of other religions,” Pope John Paul II was a strong believer in and major promoter of interfaith dialogue, believing that “what unites us is much greater than what separates us” and that it is necessary “to rid ourselves of stereotypes, of old habits and

above all, it is necessary to recognize the unity that already exists.” Among other actions, he promoted interfaith prayer meetings in Assisi in 1986 and again in 2002, speaking there about the “sign of hope” it was to see representatives of so many faith traditions gathered together. He also took part in an Interreligious Assembly for Peace at the Vatican in 1999.

Pope Benedict XVI appeared at times to have much less enthusiasm for interfaith dialogue than his predecessor. His comments on the subject suggested a suspicion that interreligious dialogue requires “setting one’s faith aside” (a phrase taken from a letter he wrote in 2008 to Italian philosopher Marcello Pera) and opens the door to the relativism he has spoken so forcefully against. Although he participated in the 2002 Assisi interfaith gathering, he later wrote that “there are undeniably dangers and it is indisputable that the Assisi meetings, especially in 1986, were misinterpreted by many people.”

Pope Francis has spoken of the importance of interreligious dialogue on a number of occasions. Speaking in 2013 to the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, he said that the increasing movements of peoples challenge Christians to be more open to different cultures, religions and traditions. The Pope quoted from his Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* in saying that "an attitude of openness in truth and love must prevail in dialogue with believers of non-Christian religions, despite the various obstacles and difficulties, particularly fundamentalism on both sides. "

On his visit to the Holy Land last year, the Pope spoke again of the value of interfaith dialogue, in that context stressing its value as a conflict resolution tool.

Constructive dialogue between people of different faith traditions, he believes, service to overcome fear.

Pope Francis has emphasized that dialogue does not mean giving up one's identity as a Christian. Rather, in his words, "true openness means remaining firm in ones deepest convictions, and therefore being open to understanding others." Addressing leaders of Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim and other Christian denominations in January, Pope Francis spoke of respect for others' religions needing to be grounded in "a full and forthright presentation of our respective convictions."

The Value of Interreligious Dialogue

Why should anyone, regardless of his or her faith, think there is any benefit in exploring other religious traditions? What is the goal of such dialogue? (Did *Gaudium et Spes* and the other Vatican II documents I've referenced achieve something of value for Catholics or something that can only lead to confusion?)

In his 2010 Santa Clara Lecture on *Evangelization and Interreligious Dialogue*, Professor Peter Phan expressed the goal of interreligious dialogue as

mutual correction and enrichment. In interreligious dialogue *both* Christian and other believers are invited to examine their religious beliefs and practices, to correct them when necessary (this is always necessary at least for Christians, since the church is "*semper reformanda*"), to deepen their commitment to *their own faiths* and to live them more fully.

Those words capture well the experience of those who have engaged seriously with other religions, that is, that by such engagement we learn much about ourselves and our own religions. Referring to his experience with the Dalai Lama, Jewish Orthodox Rabbi Irving Greenberg said:

The Dalai Lama taught us a lot about Buddhism, even more about *menschlichkeit* [humanness], and most of all about Judaism. As all true dialogue accomplishes,

the encounter with the Dalai Lama opened to us the other faith's integrity. Equally valuable, the encounter reminded us of neglected aspects of ourselves, of elements in Judaism that are overlooked until they are reflected back to us in the mirror of the Other.

Zen Rabbi Alan Lew writes that it was Zen practice that helped him to discover the depth of Jewish spirituality and quotes a friend of his who suggested that his years of Zen meditation enabled him to understand how deep and "utterly gratifying" ordinary Jewish practices could be.

Tom Chetwynd made a similar observation about his experience with Zen Buddhism in *Zen & The Kingdom of Heaven*, writing "I had had the privilege to be born into Christianity, but because I had encountered Zen, I would not die in it—I would *live* in it." He describes in that book how his Zen practice allowed him to see new things in his Christian practice he had not seen before and "to take a fresh delight in the Mass."

Hugo Enomiya-Lassalle, S.J., concluded from his experience that the practice of Zen can help one "to add a new dimension to his knowledge of his religion."

Brother David Steindl-Rast, a Catholic Benedictine monk from whose writings I have learned a tremendous amount, speaks of the difference between remaining rooted in one's own religious tradition and being stuck in it. Being rooted in one's tradition while being able to draw and learn from the truths and practices of other traditions helps the roots of one's own faith grow deeper. This has certainly been my experience coming back to Christianity from Buddhism; I have found that there is much in Buddhism that benefits the Christian seriously committed to deepening his or her faith and relationship with God.

During the latter part of his life, Thomas Merton, who was Catholic and a Trappist monk, became convinced that other world religions could enlighten Catholics and bring spiritual wisdom. In *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, Merton wrote:

The heresy of individualism: thinking oneself a completely self-sufficient unit and asserting this imaginary “unity” against all others. The affirmation of the self as simply “not the other.” But when you seek to affirm your unity by denying that you have anything to do with anyone else, by negating everyone else in the universe until you come down to *you*, what is there left to affirm? Even if there were something to affirm, you would have no breath left with which to affirm it.

The true way is just the opposite: the more I am able to affirm others, to say “yes” to them in myself, by discovering them in myself and myself in them, the more real I am. I am fully real if my own heart says *yes* to *everyone*.

I will be a better Catholic, not if I can refute every shade of Protestantism, but if I can affirm the truth in it and still go further.

So, too, with the Muslims, the Hindus, the Buddhists, etc. This does not mean syncretism, indifferentism, the vapid and careless friendliness that accepts everything by thinking of nothing. There is much that one cannot “affirm” and “accept,” but first one must say *yes* where one really can.

If I affirm myself as Catholic merely by denying all that is Muslim, Jewish, Protestant, Hindu, Buddhist, etc., in the end I will find that there is not much left for me to affirm as a Catholic: and certainly no breath of the Spirit with which to affirm it.

Merton is obviously speaking from his own standpoint as a Catholic. But there is truth to his observation that, whatever one’s own faith tradition happens to be, there is danger in affirming ourselves by negating all that is of other religions. It is true that there are differences among the world religions and it would be folly to pretend otherwise. (This is why I said at the outset that the goal of interreligious dialogue is not to conclude, “Oh well, it’s all the same.” It is not.)

But there is also much truth in faith traditions other than our own that we can affirm and, to use a line I loved from the first time I heard it (and that is consistent with

the tone of the Vatican II documents to which I alluded), any truth belongs to the Holy Spirit. In a similar vein, Ippolito Desideri, a Christian missionary to Tibet in the 18th Century, believed that points of convergences between one's own religious tradition and another indirectly affirm both. Marcus Borg has made a similar observation in respect of Buddhism and Christianity, suggesting that "the parallels between the wisdom teaching of Jesus and the Buddha add to the credibility of both."

When I talk about learning more about one's own faith by encountering other faith traditions, I am talking about something that goes beyond accumulating an intellectual understanding of concepts. Rather, I am talking about an internal (as well as external) dialogue and engagement at a level that allows one to grow into a mature embrace of one's own religion. Such a mature embrace occurs when the faith tradition into which we were born becomes something we freely choose—when I call myself Catholic, for example, not simply because my Catholic parents baptized me as a baby, but because I have committed myself to a Catholic path, with a full understanding of what that means. Talking about teaching a course in World Religions to a Catholic high school class, one teacher observed:

As I began teaching the course, the reason behind offering a world religion course became more apparent: to help them understand Christian Catholic distinctiveness, what separates our faith from others. By studying other traditions, we attempted to highlight the "what" and "why" of our own beliefs, growing in our appreciation of what it means to be a follower of Christ.

Exposure to other faith traditions also serves as a reality check on our own expressions of belief. One of the tactics of religious cults is precisely to control the flow of information received by cult members so that the only religious message received comes from the cult leader. If one hears only a singular message, it is difficult to do

anything more than give blind assent to it; it is impossible to evaluate the truth and merit of the position. It is, of course, easy to say, “Well, that is true of cults, but not of my religion.” (Doubtless members of many cults would respond the same way.) But the truth remains that we need some voice outside of our own faith system to act as a check—to keep us honest so to speak, to ensure we are not being led astray. Something against which to test our convictions.

True dialogue with other faith traditions forces us to understand positions that are counter to our own tradition and to try to articulate for ourselves and others why those positions are inferior to our own, why our faith speaks a truth that another faith does not. It is one thing to say “my faith has the fullest deposit of faith and is the only true way” because we read it somewhere; it is quite another to embrace what it is that makes our faith “true” in a way that transforms our lives. Raimon Panikkar writes in *The Intrareligious Dialogue* that “dialogue serves the useful purpose of laying bare our own assumptions and those of others, thereby giving us a more critically grounded conviction of what we hold to be true.” The hope is that such dialogue “prompts genuine religious pondering, and...turns into intrapersonal soliloquy. In his essay *On Liberty*, John Stuart Mill expressed the view that in matters such as morals and religions, one can arrive at truth only when one hears the positions of others who actually hold opposing views—and hears them “from persons who actually believe them; who defend them in earnest, and do their very utmost for them.”

Brother David Steindl-Rast and Raimon Panikkar draw a distinction between faith and belief that is useful in thinking about interfaith dialogue. Both understand “faith” to refer to an expression or recognition of our connection with the transcendent and “belief”

to refer to a particular expression or embodiment of that more universal faith. “Faith,” in Panikkar’s words, is the “connection with the beyond, however, you choose to envision it,” and “belief” is the particular vision one holds. Although faith and belief are intimately related to each other, the distinction is an important one because it allows us to create room for different expressions of truth without making truth relative.

It is very easy to confuse faith and belief. True dialogue between religious traditions, by which I mean one approached with an openness to the other, helps us see where there is unity of faith, unity of underlying reality. However, to minimize the differences that exist at the level of belief systems risks confusion and the kind of syncretism Merton warned against, creating the danger that in mixing the two traditions we lose something of the uniqueness of the individual expressions.

If the aim of interreligious dialogue were a syncretism that truly required individuals to set aside their own beliefs in search of some kind of lowest common denominator or that sought the homogenization of all religions into one, some of Pope Benedict’s concerns that I mentioned earlier would be legitimate. But I really believe that concern is misplaced, although I acknowledge that there are many people in our religiously pluralistic society who suggest that all religions are the same and differences are merely different streams flowing into the same river. The true goal is not to try (as Stephen Prothero warns against in his book *God is Not One*) to remake other religions into our own or to shy away from discussions of their differences. In the words of the USCCB, “dialogue does not mean renouncing one’s own identity when it goes against another’s, nor does it mean compromising Christian faith and morals.” John Paul II was

very clear that in engaging other faith traditions it was necessary to avoid a false peace based on watered down positions and incomplete dialogue.

Rather, the aim is to find those areas in which we can learn from each other in a way that allows us to deepen our own faith, as well as to better understand what differences among religions reflect different core principles and foundational truths and that are different ways of expressing the same core principles and foundational truths. I suspect that focusing on what different religions share rather than on where they are different will lead to the conclusion that differences at the level of underlying principles and truth, while not nonexistent, are not as great as some might think. In the words of Pope Francis, “if we are honest in presenting our convictions, we will be able to see more clearly what we hold in common. New avenues will be opened for mutual esteem, cooperation and, indeed, friendship.” This last is important: The benefit of interfaith dialogue is not just our own spiritual development, but how it aids our ability to grow in relationship with people who are different from us.

It is certainly true that if one takes the position that one’s own faith tradition has nothing to learn from another faith tradition, even this goal seems suspect. In the case of Catholicism, the traditional Catholic view of itself as having the fullest “deposit of faith” is too easily (and mistakenly) translated into precisely that attitude, one that I have heard expressed by more than one Catholic. If it is misguided or “gravely deficient” to follow another religion, it is easy to assume that one should avoid (and perhaps even fear) anything coming out of another faith tradition. Hopefully the language used by the Church in *Gaudium et spes* and subsequent documents will help people avoid that view.

I mentioned that I come to this subject via 20 years as a Buddhist, so let me add that this concern presents much less of a risk for many Buddhists, particularly Tibetan Buddhists, who tend to view the existence of different religions as reflective of both different cultural influences and the fact that individuals have different inclinations, abilities, and interests. Notwithstanding the enormous spread of Buddhism beyond the place of its birth and the enormous numbers of Westerners who flock to Buddhist teachers, Tibetan Buddhists today don't actively seek to convert others to Buddhism. The Dalai Lama has explicitly said that conversion "is not the point," that "humanity needs all the world's religions to suit the ways of life, diverse spiritual needs, and inherited national traditions of individual human beings." On more than one occasion he has said that it is better not to convert from one religion to another, believing it to be generally better to stay within one's own religious tradition and culture. Similarly, the late Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche once told a Jewish student of his that he should observe the Jewish Sabbath as his meditation practice. Similar sentiments have been expressed by Hindu teachers. One reportedly responded to a Christian who told him he planned to convert to Hinduism, "If you think you should convert, then you insult both your religion and Hinduism."

It is also the case that many Buddhists hold less tightly to doctrine than do Christians, eschewing attachment to anything, even to ideology. The first of Thich Nhat Hanh's *Fourteen Precepts of Engaged Buddhism* is a determination "not be idolatrous about or bound to any doctrine, theory, or ideology, even Buddhist ones. Buddhist systems of thought are guiding means; they are not absolute truth."

All of this suggests that it may be easier for many people in at least some faith traditions to approach interfaith dialogue in a more open and positive way than is possible for at least some Catholics. Nonetheless, the distinction between syncretism and mutual enrichment is an important one.

While my personal experience is largely dialogue between Buddhists and Christians, I think Muslim-Christian (and Muslim-Jewish) dialogue is increasingly important in our world. A lot of my comments have focused on the value of exposure to other faith traditions for one's own spiritual growth (a not surprising emphasis given that I am a spiritual director). And (also not surprising given that my focus on spiritual formation) I believe there is a lot of value not only in the dialogue about beliefs, but about practice – and exploration about how practices from other faith traditions can enrich our own. (It is for that reason that my book, *Growing in Love and Wisdom*, published by Oxford a couple of years ago is primarily focused on adapting Buddhist meditations for Christians.) But I think Pope Francis is correct that interfaith dialogue can be a force for peace and conflict resolution and that makes dialogue with Muslims incredibly important. The USCCB recognized this in its recent *Dialogue With Muslims Committee Statement*, which talks about how dialogue has helped us “to work through and overcome much of our mutual ignorance, habitual distrust and debilitating fears.”

I say nothing surprising when I say that tensions between Islam and “the West” (which largely means Jews and Christians) is high. The peace of our world depends on reducing those tensions.

Christianity and Islam share a common heritage, meaning it should be possible to dialogue in a meaningful way. Possible to build bridges – not to convert each other – but to grow from what it shared between us.

Inclusivism Not Pluralism

I don't want to end without acknowledging that there is some tension in the Church's position that interreligious dialogue is a good thing but that salvation is tied to Christ. It is clear that the Church's current view of the value of interreligious dialogue proceeds from inclusivism, not pluralism. It emphatically rejects pluralism – the view that all major religions are equally valid and lead to God and salvation. The pluralist claim is that all or most religions stress love of God and love of neighbor and that can be done through more than one faith tradition. There are Christian theologians who posit a pluralist position, but that is not the official theological approach of the Catholic Church.

Whether the inclusivist position will continue to be respected in the pluralist work in which we live is a different question; it may be a position that marginalizes the Church. But that is a discussion for another day.