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THINKING WITH *NOSTRA AETATE*: FROM THE NEW PLURALISM TO COMPARATIVE THEOLOGY

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1. Introduction

Newly elected Pope Francis caused a stir in the Western world with a homily he gave after a mass on the Feast of St Rita of Cascia, the patroness of impossible things.¹ Reflecting on the salvific implications of the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the Holy Father observed:

The Lord has redeemed all of us, all of us, with the Blood of Christ: all of us, not just Catholics. Everyone! 'Father, the atheists?' Even the atheists. Everyone! And this Blood makes us children of God of the first class! We are created children in the likeness of God and the Blood of Christ has redeemed us all! And we all have a duty to do good. And this commandment for everyone to do good, I think, is a beautiful path towards peace. If we, each doing our own part, if we do good to others, if we meet there, doing good, and we go slowly, gently, little by little, we will make that culture of encounter: we need that so much. We must meet one another doing good. 'But I don't believe, Father, I am an atheist!' But do good: we will meet one another there.²

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¹On St Rita, see Joseph A. Sicardo, *St. Rita of Cascia: Saint of the Impossible*, trans. Dan J. Murphy, Rockford Ill: Tan Books and Publishers, 1983.

²"Pope at Mass: Culture of Encounter is the Foundation of Peace," *Vatican Radio* (May 23, 2013) http://en.radiovaticana.va/news/2013/05/22/pope_at_mass:_culture_of_encounter_is_the_foundation_of_peace/en1-694445

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Pope Francis's remarks elicited praise from some quarters and consternation from others. Writing in the *Huffington Post*, David Lose argued that the Pontiff was embracing the new pluralism — a pluralism that included not only non-Christians but atheists as well.³ Of course, some atheists were indeed “pleased” with the new tone coming out of the Vatican, but others were rather nonplused.⁴ Alice Carey, a self described “writer and Style Icon,” responded that as an atheist she had no desire to go to heaven in the first place — though she did feel chummy enough with the Pope to call him a “bad boy” and to address him as “Frank” midway through her piece.⁵ Some Catholics and evangelical Christians were concerned that Pope Francis was either devaluing the centrality of the Catholic church as an institution or that he was somehow advocating a kind of works righteousness that would make grace and faith superfluous. Commenting on the controversy, Pope Benedict XVI's biographer, David Gibson, wrote about the Pope's homily under the title, “Is Pope Francis a Heretic?”⁶ Gibson's answer to this question was “no:” Francis was affirming a central tenet of Catholic doctrine that Christ died for the whole world, though whether one accepts that offer of salvation is “another question.”⁷ For its part, the Vatican issued an official clarification through spokesman Fr Thomas Rosica, who argued that “they cannot be saved who, knowing the Church as founded by Christ and necessary for salvation, would refuse to enter her or remain in her.”⁸

While specifically addressing atheists was indeed something new, the tone and content of Pope Francis's remarks were not. The newly elected Pontiff was echoing themes articulated most clearly during the Second Vatican Council. The Council's main statement concerning religious diversity was The Declaration on the Relation of

³David Lose, “Pope Francis and the New Pluralism,” *Huffington Post* (May 29, 2013) http://www.huffingtonpost.com/david-lose/pope-francis-and-the-new-pluralism_b_3350115.html

⁴Kimberly Winston, “Atheists Like What They See in Pope Francis' New Openness,” *Religion News Service* (May 23, 2013) <http://www.religionnews.com/2013/05/23/atheists-like-what-they-see-in-pope-francis-new-openness/>

⁵Alice Carey, “Memo to Pope Francis,” *Huffington Post* (May 28, 2013) http://www.huffingtonpost.com/alice-carey/memo-to-pope-francis_b_3348270.html

⁶David Gibson, “Is Pope Francis a Heretic? No. But He Does Raise Questions,” *Religion News Service* (May 24, 2013) <http://www.religionnews.com/2013/05/24/is-pope-francis-is-a-heretic-no-but-he-does-raise-questions/>

⁷David Gibson, “Is Pope Francis a Heretic?...”

⁸<http://www.zenit.org/en/articles/explanatory-note-on-the-meaning-of-salvation-in-francis-daily-homily-of-may-22>

the Church to Non-Christian religions, often known by its Latin title *Nostra Aetate*, meaning “In Our Time.” Promulgated by Pope Paul VI, on October 28, 1965, *Nostra Aetate* is one of the council’s most succinct documents, having only five sections.⁹ But in spite of its brevity, *Nostra Aetate* is widely credited for creating a new context for interreligious dialogue and for suggesting new ways to think about Catholicism’s relationship to the world’s non-Christian religions.

Beginning with a discussion of the Declaration itself, we will consider two theological debates that emerged in the Western world in *Nostra Aetate*’s wake. The first debate concerns how the Church can articulate the uniqueness of Jesus while still recognizing what is good and true in non-Christian religions. This debate has been oriented around what has been called either “the new pluralism” or “The Pluralist Hypothesis,” which posits that names others than that of Jesus can bring salvation. The second debate concerns whether there can be a substantive intertextuality between Catholicism and the world’s religious traditions. The effort to develop such an intertextuality is most closely associated with the discipline called Comparative Theology. Theological pluralists and comparative theologians have attempted to extend and reframe some of the key insights and assumptions embedded in *Nostra Aetate*. As one might have expected, these efforts have brought to the fore deep theological and political questions about the limits of Catholic engagement with non-Christian religions. But as Pope Francis has reminded us, the issue is not simply Catholicism’s relationship with those who believe in a non-Christian religion, but also Catholicism’s relationship to those who believe in no religion at all. And so, to conclude our discussion, I will offer some reflections on how the discussion initiated by *Nostra Aetate* might profitably continue — in our own time.

2. Reading *Nostra Aetate*

One is the community of all peoples, one their origin, for God made the whole human race to live over the face of the earth. One also is their final goal, God. His providence, His manifestations of goodness, His saving design extend to all men, until that time when the elect will be united in the Holy City, the city ablaze with the glory of God, where the nations will walk in His light.¹⁰

⁹Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions, *Nostra Aetate*, (October 28, 1965), http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651028_nostra-aetate_en.html

¹⁰*Nostra Aetate* (NA), sec. 1.

Nostra Aetate begins by affirming the unity of all humanity and the common destiny of all peoples. But this universalistic vision is framed by the *eschaton*, “that time” when some will be raised to heavenly glory. *Nostra Aetate* here implicitly sets forth an anthropology for its overall consideration of the Church’s relation to non-Christian religions — after all, if different people have different goals, then there would be little reason to talk about any kind of underlying relationship at least when it comes to issues of soteriology. *Nostra Aetate* observes that all people “expect from the various religions answers to the unsolved riddles of the human condition.”¹¹ Humans are first and foremost questioners, brought together in an existential search and guided by a shared reliance on reason.

Nostra Aetate is careful not to preemptively circumscribe this search by making exclusivist Christian assertions. A clear subtext of the document concerns how Christian exclusivism has justified coercion, oppression, and violence. *Nostra Aetate*’s most extensive discussion concerns the Church’s relationship with Judaism and the Jewish people. For all Christians in the West, this is a paramount issue because of the history of Christianity’s persecution of Jews and most particularly because of the *shoah*, the genocidal slaughter of six million Jews in which many Christian were not only complicit, but also active participants. *Nostra Aetate* explicitly removes the charge of deicide against the Jews, and states that the Church “decries hatred, persecutions, displays of anti-Semitism, directed against Jews at any time and by anyone.”¹² The document also mentions the spiritual patrimony shared by Christians and Jews. Given the painful history of Jewish/Christian relations, *Nostra Aetate*’s approach can be seen as an important act of penance and reconciliation.

Nostra Aetate’s focus on Jewish/Christian relations stemmed from Pope John XXIII’s desire to have a statement that would address the often-tortured history of interactions between Christians and Jews. But as Jesuit historian John W. O’Malley recalls in *What Happened at Vatican II*, bishops from Asia and Africa wanted the document expanded, and it is to their influence that we owe *Nostra Aetate*’s consideration of Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism.¹³ *Nostra Aetate*

¹¹NA, sec. 1.

¹²NA, sec. 5.

¹³John W. O’Malley, *What Really Happened at Vatican II?*, Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008, 218-224.

praises how Muslims submit themselves to God and thus follow the example of Abraham. *Nostra Aetate* also acknowledges how Buddhism gives insight into the insufficiency of the material world and its constant changeability.¹⁴ With regard to Hinduism, *Nostra Aetate* seems to implicitly recognize the three kinds of yoga diagrammed by Krishna to Arjuna in the *Bhagavad-Gita*, by praising Hindus for their quest for the divine through asceticism, philosophic enquiry, and devotion.¹⁵

Nostra Aetate makes clear 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.”¹⁶ In proclaiming this, *Nostra Aetate* is clearly asserting, or more appropriately reasserting, that Christ, and His example and His teaching, is normative — which is to say that we can only recognize what is good and true in non-Christian religions because we know what is good and true through the life, death, and resurrection of the Son of God. The teaching of *Nostra Aetate* is thus in full continuity with traditional Catholic understandings of the relationship of the Church to non-Christian religions. What *Nostra Aetate* does additionally is recontextualize that teaching in light of the issues considered most pressing in the later part of the 20th century.

What is interesting about the Declaration’s overall approach to non-Christian religions is its emphasis on the intellectual content of religion. Before specifically discussing Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam, *Nostra Aetate* observes that religions “bound up with an advanced culture” speak of the fundamental questions of human life through “more refined concepts and a more developed language.”¹⁷ While today such a statement might seem to be rather patronizing, especially in its implicit attitude toward religions with primarily oral traditions, it does open up an intellectual space for conversation. Religions are not incommensurable, nor are they exclusively self-referential or closed in on themselves. Instead, religions have something comprehensible to say about important human questions. It is also strongly implied that there is a universal rationality since there is “the Truth,” not “a truth” or “truths.” Religions can thus talk

¹⁴NA, sec. 2.

¹⁵NA, 2.

¹⁶NA, sec. 2.

¹⁷NA, sec. 2.

intelligibly to one another because they refer to a shared, underlying, reality.

To acknowledge the twenty-fifth anniversary of *Nostra Aetate's* promulgation, The Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue and The Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples issued a document on "interreligious dialogue and the proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ," often called simply *Dialogue and Proclamation*.¹⁸ The document begins by echoing and reaffirming some of the key points of *Nostra Aetate*: the universality of Jesus' mission; the broad effects of divine grace; and that the Holy Spirit is most certainly operative outside the institutional boundaries of the Catholic church. The document also presents a quite nuanced understanding of different types of dialogue, such as "the dialogue of life," "the dialogue of action," "the dialogue of theological exchange," and "the dialogue of religious experience."¹⁹ Of these it is the dialogue of religious experience that is most suggestive since it allows for "sharing of spiritual riches," which most obviously affirms that religions can indeed learn something of value from one another. But while *Dialogue and Proclamation* does indeed speak about dialogue, it emphasizes proclamation more loudly. The fundamental mission of the Catholic church is to proclaim Jesus Christ. Indeed, proclamation finally subsumes dialogue because, as the document observes, "where people are disposed to hear the message of the Gospel and have the possibility of responding to it, the Church is duty bound to meet their expectations."²⁰

3. The New Pluralism

The return to an emphasis on proclamation was in some ways designed as corrective to how the discussion initiated by *Nostra Aetate* developed in Western academic contexts over the years. Of course, all the documents of Vatican II assumed a life of their own after they were promulgated. But in the case of Christianity's relationship to non-Christian religions, it was what came to be called "the new pluralism" that received the most attention in Western academic

¹⁸*Dialogue and Proclamation: Reflections and Orientations on Interreligious Dialogue and the Proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ*, The Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue (May 19, 1991) http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/interelg/documents/rc_pc_interelg_doc_19051991_dialogue-and-proclamatio_en.html [This document was also issued by the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples on June 21, 1991.]

¹⁹*Dialogue and Proclamation*, sec. 42.

²⁰*Dialogue and Proclamation*, sec. 76.

settings. In some ways, the term “new pluralism” is misleading, since religious diversity is hardly something new. But openly engaging pluralism, as *Nostra Aetate* did, suggested new possibilities for a good number of theologians in the Western world. Many asked whether a Christian theology of religions could embrace an even more expansive pluralism. “Yes” is how some theologians responded, especially since *Nostra Aetate* seemed to affirm that the uniqueness of Jesus Christ could be understood in ways different from those traditionally embraced by Catholicism.

In Catholic circles, discussion of theological responses to the new pluralism began in earnest with the publication of *No Other Name: A Critical Survey of Christian Attitudes Toward the World Religions*, written by a former Divine Word missionary, Paul Knitter.²¹ *No Other Name* begins with a helpful survey of Christian approaches to the world religions. One is the exclusivist position taken by many Christian evangelicals that unabashedly defends the “scandal of particularity” in the belief that human beings are saved through and by Christ alone.²² While the mainline Protestant model also emphasizes salvation through Christ alone, it admits the possibility of “general revelation” even though non-Christian religions constitute only a negative preparation for the Gospel.²³ Catholic views, such as those associated with *Nostra Aetate* or Karl Rahner’s understanding of the anonymous Christian, take this notion of general revelation a step further and argue that non-Christian religions can be positive preparations for the Gospel.²⁴ Some Protestant and Catholic theologians have gone even further to embrace what Knitter calls a “theocentric model”—a true “Copernican Revolution” in thinking about the interrelationship between Christianity and the world’s religious traditions. It is this theocentric model that Knitter wishes to defend in *No Other Name*.

The theocentric model displaces Jesus Christ from salvific centrality. According to Knitter, theocentric approaches can be

²¹Paul F. Knitter, *No Other Name? A Critical Survey of Christian Attitudes Toward the World Religions*. Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 1989.

²²Paul F. Knitter, *No Other Name?*, 89.

²³Paul F. Knitter, *No Other Name?*

²⁴Paul F. Knitter, *No Other Name?*, 127. On Rahner’s discussion of anonymous Christianity, see Mathew N. Schmalz, “Transcendental Reduction: Karl Rahner’s Theory of Anonymous Christianity. I,” *Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflection* 59 (October 1995) 680-692; Mathew N. Schmalz, “Transcendental Reduction: Karl Rahner’s Theory of Anonymous Christianity. II,” *Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflection* 59 (November 1995) 741-752.

observed in embryo in many contemporary transcendental and process theologies, which understand the “myth of the incarnation” as an affirmation of the “non-dualistic unity between humanity and divinity.”²⁵ But most arguments for this unity beg the question why Jesus necessarily must be the only person in whom this divine/human unity is made manifest. Knitter thus argues for a “non-normative” interpretation of Christ, in line with “theocentric theologians,” such as Raimundo Pannikar, John Hick, and Stanley Samartha. Of course, Christians can and indeed must speak of Jesus as normative for them — but this is a confessional and experiential claim, not a propositional one. Such a “Copernican revolution” allows for a renewed openness to dialogue that does not preemptively circumscribe discussion within a conventional Christian framework. For Paul Knitter, interreligious dialogue needs to be fearless in “doing” before “knowing” in “the exciting pursuit of understanding.”²⁶ Emerging from this discussion is an understanding of truth as “defined not by exclusion but by relation.”²⁷

It would be incorrect to say that *Nostra Aetate* is the direct source of this engagement with the new pluralism, especially since *Nostra Aetate* surely did not go far enough in the view of Paul Knitter and others who have followed his theological lead. However, *Nostra Aetate* did chart a new trajectory for discussing Christianity’s relationship to non-Christian religions, and this discussion assumed its own dynamic within the increasingly pluralistic and secular societies of the West. The pluralist approach most certainly has a powerful logic: if truth exists in other religions, we could say that other religions besides Christianity offer a path to salvation; if all can be paths to salvation, then other names besides that of Jesus can save. Of course, equally important to the pluralist approach is its assessment of how dialogue needs to be conducted in this day and age. Christian exclusivity is associated not just with a dismissive attitude toward non-Christian religions, but with Christianity’s long history of violence and oppression to those deemed “other” or “alien.” Abandoning Christian uniqueness and exclusivity is thus understood as an important step toward inter-religious coexistence in an age of competing truth claims that all too often provide the pretext for religious violence.

²⁵Paul F. Knitter, *No Other Name?*, 191.

²⁶Paul F. Knitter, *No Other Name?*, 215.

²⁷Paul F. Knitter, *No Other Name?*, 219.

While the pluralist approach was discussed in Western universities in the early 1990s, there were strong reactions against it, and not just among conservative theologians. In an interesting rejoinder to pluralist positions, Roman Catholic theologian Gavin D'Costa wrote *Theology and Religious Pluralism*.²⁸ D'Costa initially focuses on the work of Protestant theologian John Hick, who coined the term "pluralist hypothesis" and whose work inspired Knitter's theological forays into questions of interreligious dialogue, coexistence, and truth. D'Costa's fundamental point about theocentric theologies is that they fail to recognize how Christian theocentrism is necessarily grounded upon Christocentrism. That is, the idea of God's universal salvific will, which is so essential for pluralists, comes directly from God's self-disclosure in the Incarnation.²⁹ For this reason, any kind of Christian theology of religions must begin with Christ — regardless of how we understand "the myth" of Jesus's death and resurrection.

More positively, D'Costa attempts to reclaim a robust Catholic Christian "inclusivism." By inclusivism, D'Costa means a position "that affirms the salvific presence of God in non-Christian religions while still maintaining that Christ is the definitive and authoritative revelation from God."³⁰ As part of this inclusivism, D'Costa distinguishes two interrelated kinds of dialogue: dialogue between peoples and dialogue between institutions. Christian participation in these dialogues must acknowledge that Christ is indeed normative and definitive without turning that acknowledgment into an arrogant dismissal of non-Christian religions, their practices, and truth claims. What D'Costa envisages is a Christianity "indigenized" and "fulfilled by dialogue" since Christianity itself "will find its own fulfilment through a real meeting with the riches and insights within other religions."³¹

But even in D'Costa's balanced and hopeful vision, tensions still abound. For example, D'Costa brings forward the work of Indian theologian D.S. Amalorpavadass and the National Biblical Catechetical and Liturgical Centre to promote a "New Order for the Mass in India." As D'Costa accurately recalls, Latin Rite Catholics in South India resisted these innovations, which were eventually suppressed by the Vatican. D'Costa presents this as an example of the

²⁸Gavin D'Costa, *Theology and Religious Pluralism: The Challenge of Other Religions*, New York: Basil Blackwell, Inc. 1986.

²⁹Gavin D'Costa, *Theology and Religious Pluralism*, 36.

³⁰Gavin D'Costa, *Theology and Religious Pluralism*, 80.

³¹Gavin D'Costa, *Theology and Religious Pluralism*, 124.

institutional dilemmas faced in any sincere attempt at dialogue. But D'Costa does not seem to recognize that another issue is whose views are privileged as dialogue begins. While D'Costa implicitly lauds Amalorpavadass's work as reflecting the aspirations of "the indigenous Church," others might see an elitism that marginalizes Dalit voices in order to adapt powerful currents in Indian nationalistic discourse.³² It was an uneven dialogue between institutions and peoples that reflected diverse voices and different levels of access and power.

While specifically theological discussions of the new pluralism often orient themselves around the position of Jesus in Christian soteriology, the more fundamental questions relate to the status of truth. Normative claims can be either exclusive or inclusive, but in either case there a particular assumption is made about what is true and this necessarily circumscribes the parameters of dialogue. Of course, it does not take a licentiate philosophy to understand how the position that there can be no normative claims is itself normative. And so, in pluralist positions there is often an uncomfortable, and as yet unresolved, tension. But it is also undeniable that theological construals of the "new pluralism" are well-suited to our contemporary age in which our very notion of what is real is often fluid and shifting thanks to the expansion of cyberspace. While God may not be dead in the Western world just yet, Christian metanarratives are more palatable if presented as mythological reflections or literary tropes. For pluralists, this might be a salutary aspect of a religious Copernican revolution, but others might see a wholesale surrender to the logic of post-modernity, along with a marketing of the theological equivalent of "the MacDonald's hamburger."³³

From the perspective of *Nostra Aetate*, the claim that Christ and Christianity are unique is not a kind of imperialistic assertion. Instead, Christian uniqueness exists a necessary prerequisite for making any kind of moral claim at all particularly moral claims that critique the excesses and self-satisfaction of America and Europe.

³²For a fuller analysis of this dynamic, see Mathew N. Schmalz, "Ad Experimentum: Theology, Anthropology and the Paradoxes of Indian Catholic Inculturation," *Theology and the Social Sciences*, ed. Michael Barnes, Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 2001, 161-180; see also Mathew N. Schmalz, "The Indian Church: Catholicism and Indian Nationhood," *The Catholic Church and the Nation-State: Comparative Perspectives*, ed. Paul Manuel, Lawrence Reardon, and Clyde Wilcox, Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2006, 209-225.

³³See Kenneth Surin, "A 'Certain Politics of Speech': 'Religious Pluralism' in the Age of the MacDonald's Hamburger," *Modern Theology* 1, 7 (October 1990) 67-100.

However, the claim could also be made that uniqueness is a reciprocal quality and non-Christian religions are also unique. Uniqueness as a normative assertion regarding the possibility of salvation and uniqueness as a descriptive term are both implicated in *Nostra Aetate's* discussion. In critiquing approaches to the new pluralism that conflate these points, Catholic theologians not only draw upon *Nostra Aetate's* content and spirit, but also link Catholic theology of religions to other aspects of Catholic social teaching that have profound contemporary relevance. In this way, one can see an almost dialectic movement in the reception of *Nostra Aetate's* teaching that has led to a more nuanced articulation of the claim of Christianity's uniqueness that takes the status of "other religions" seriously.

4. Comparative Theology

Debate over the new pluralism and "the pluralist hypothesis" crested in the 1990s. Of more contemporary relevance is how inter-religious dialogue and theology of religions have coalesced into what has become a fairly well-defined area of inquiry now called "comparative theology." The development of this approach is justly credited to the work of Francis Xavier Clooney, a Jesuit who now heads Harvard University's Center for the Study of World Religions. Clooney initially set out his vision of comparative theology in *Theology after Vedanta*. In *Theology after Vedanta*, Clooney turns to Advaita Vedanta, the school of Indian thought focused upon the Upanishads that developed as a commentarial tradition explicating the *Uttara Mimamsa Sutras* of Badarayana.³⁴ Through this comparative theological project, Clooney envisioned an inter-textuality between religious traditions that still preserves distinction and difference. In one sense, Clooney is drawing upon opportunities opened by *Nostra Aetate*, since *Nostra Aetate* most certainly admits to an inter-textuality among the Abrahamic religions. But Clooney, along with the theologians who have followed his lead, extends this inter-textuality much more broadly by envisioning interreligious dialogue as a theological experiment in reading.³⁵

In *Hindu God, Christian God*, Clooney extends this theological experiment in reading to include theologians. In his introductory reflections, Clooney looks to the example of the 16th Jesuit missionary

³⁴Clooney, Francis X. *Theology After Vedanta*, Albany: SUNY Press, 1993.

³⁵For a discussion of Clooney's work which I draw upon here, see Mathew N. Schmalz, "Tradition and Transgression in the Comparative Theology of Francis Xavier Clooney, SJ," *Religious Studies Review* 29 (April 2003) 130-136.

to Madurai, Roberto de Nobili. While some of de Nobili's views might be distinctly unfashionable today, Clooney wishes to retrieve de Nobili's faith in, and reliance upon, reason. "Reasoning," Clooney observes, "is not everything, but it is indispensable in making possible a theology that is inter-religious, comparative, dialogical, and yet again confessional."³⁶ Accordingly, Clooney charts out a reasoned theological discussion between Hindu and Christian interlocutors over issues such as God's existence, identity, embodiment, and word. Especially interesting is how Clooney places Karl Rahner's interpretation of the Sacred Heart of Jesus into dialogue with Shaiva and Vaishnava understandings of divine embodiment. Whether the heart of Jesus, the *linga* of Lord Shiva, or the feet of Narayana, these symbols allow devotees to "begin to apprehend in a tactile and even sensual fashion the material presence and commitment of God to the human race."³⁷ What Clooney charts through this discussion is a reciprocal dialogical transformation in which "no one will be easily able to disregard either the good theology or the underlying good faith of believers in other traditions who agree that God is embodied in the world."³⁸

This reciprocal openness comes with great risks in the views of other theologians. In a talk delivered at the annual meeting of the Lilly Fellows Program, Catholic convert and theologian Paul Griffiths used the metaphor of "Egyptian gold" to explore the implications of Christian engagement with non-Christian religions.³⁹ "Egyptian gold" was used by the Israelites to adorn the Ark of the Covenant. The Egyptian gold is obviously beautiful and precious, but the Egyptians do not appreciate its uses. Similarly, while beautiful wisdom and precious truths may be found in non-Christian religions, only Christians can fully understand, and make use of, that wisdom and truth. In making this argument, Griffiths draws primarily on Origen, Tertullian, and Augustine, theologians who were both engaging and confronting "paganism." Tertullian, for example, had strong reservations against Christians teaching pagan literature

³⁶Francis X. Clooney, SJ, *Hindu God, Christian God*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001, 14

³⁷Francis X. Clooney, SJ, *Hindu God, Christian God*, 124.

³⁸Francis X. Clooney, SJ, *Hindu God, Christian God*, 128. For reflections from "the second generation" of comparative theologians, see Francis X. Clooney, ed., *Comparative Theology: Interreligious Insights from the Next Generation*, New York: T & T Clark, 2010.

³⁹Paul Griffiths "Seeking Egyptian Gold: A Fundamental Metaphor for the Christian Intellectual Life in a Religiously Diverse Age," *The Cresset* (2000) 6-17.

precisely because that literature assumed the reality of the pagan gods. Griffiths also records Jerome's ambivalence about reading pagan literature, an act with Jerome likened "to eating meat sacrificed to idols or wine offered to demons."⁴⁰ While Griffiths is obviously being playfully provocative, at the heart of his cautions lies the recognition that the act of reading is itself an act of devotion. In this sense, there can be no reading of non-Christian texts from a perspective of neutrality. What Christians can do is revive the commentarial tradition, exemplified by Nicholas of Cusa's reading of the Qu'ran. If we were to accept Griffiths points and extend them further, it would seem that comparative theology is precisely the wrong way to approach non-Christian texts. To avoid the temptations identified by Tertullian and Jerome, it is absolutely necessary to pay close attention to the boundaries set by magisterium of the church.

While Clooney and Griffiths' approaches would seem to be polar opposites, they do share some very Catholic qualities in common. Not only do both Clooney and Griffiths understand religious reading as something serious and distinctive, they also affirm that Christians have much to learn from non-Christians. In this sense, both Clooney and Griffiths echo some of the crucial themes articulated in *Nostra Aetate*, particularly the idea of universal revelation. Also, both Clooney and Griffiths advocate forms of theological appropriation. This is most obvious when Griffiths speaks of using "the riches" of non-Christian religions in the same way as the Israelites used "Egyptian gold." The metaphor of the Egyptian gold is itself something that Griffiths is appropriating, and redeploying, from the Hebrew Bible in an explicitly Christian way. While the interplay of appropriation is not as explicit in Clooney's work, it is most certainly the case that *Theology After Vedanta* appropriates and redeploys crucial moves from the Mimamsaka tradition in order to facilitate reciprocal readings, or inter-readings, of key religious texts. Appropriation implies boundaries, and at issue between comparative theologians and their critics is precisely how boundaries between and within religious traditions should be inscribed.⁴¹

One might say that the most crucial issue in comparative theology is the same as that which confronts pluralist theologians: the status of

⁴⁰Paul Griffiths "Seeking Egyptian Gold...", 9.

⁴¹For a discussion of boundaries and appropriations in South Asian religions, see Peter Gottschalk and Mathew N. Schmalz, "Introduction," in *Engaging South Asian Religions: Boundaries, Appropriations, and Resistances*, Mathew N. Schmalz and Peter Gottschalk, ed., Albany: SUNY Press, 2011, 1-20.

truth. But it might be more accurate to say that the issue of authority precedes that of truth. Religious texts have authority; they place demands upon us. The obvious difficulty is how one adjudicates competing claims to authority. One might argue, as Clooney does, that reason provides a framework to balance, or work through, seemingly incommensurable or conflicting claims on how or whether one can read what Griffiths would describe as “alien” religious texts. But as Clooney himself acknowledges, religious texts concern revelation as well as reason.⁴²

Authority is also a crucial concern when it comes to acts of theological appropriation. Griffiths is aware of this issue, but minimizes its implications when he argues: “Seeking Egyptian gold, as a Christian act, is to be framed, and constrained, always by the demands of *caritas*; this acts, or should act, as a constraint against the arrogance and violence of the imperialist.”⁴³

All of this is fine — in theory. But actual Christian history shows something else. For example, Goa’s fierce inquisition was called “*rigor misericordia*,” the “rigor of mercy” — a name that surely struck many Hindus, Muslims, and Protestants as painfully ironic.⁴⁴ Christian coercion and violence has always been justified by self-serving construals of *caritas*. While Griffiths might argue that such understandings of Christian charity were mistaken, his own laudatory citations of Tertullian and Jerome recognize the paradoxical but pervasive power of human weakness, especially when the object is “gold.” When it comes to comparative theology, issues of authority are more subtle but no less pressing. For example, it is quite clear that some comparative theologians are quite concerned with subverting ecclesiastic and canonical authority within the Catholic church. While such subversions may be salutary — especially for academics — there are very real ethical questions involved when one takes something from another tradition and uses it covertly to operate within a radically different register of value. Moreover, does the notion of “universal revelation” authorize crossing established religious boundaries? Is it permissible to have a

⁴²See *Hindu God, Christian God*, 129-162.

⁴³Paul Griffiths “Seeking Egyptian Gold...,” 17.

⁴⁴On the Rigor and its aftermath, see Mathew N. Schmalz, “A Special Place: Imagining Goa from the *Estadio da India* to Indian Independence,” *Religion and Politics in a Global Society: Comparative Perspectives from the Portuguese World*, ed., Paul Christopher Manuel, Alynna Lyon, and Clyde Wilcox, Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 163-184.

“Christian reading” of the Quran that displaces or sublates Muslim commentary and commentators? Seen from another perspective, how would Catholic Christians react, in Pakistan’s Punjab province or in India’s Orissa state, if Muslims or Hindus “appropriated” elements of Catholic worship and practice in contexts of very real religious violence? Would such acts heal wounds or make them deeper? Given the violence that Christians have often inflicted on religions considered to be “other” or “alien,” perhaps the most prudent course is to respect authoritative boundaries between religious traditions, rather than naively crossing them in the hopes of better understanding.

But all the issues connected with authority and interreligious dialogue, perhaps the most vexing is who, precisely, has the authority to enter into the conversation. In any kind of Catholic interreligious discussion, inevitably the questions arise concerning what kind of authority being privileged: the teaching authority conferred by apostolic succession or the academic authority validated by a university degree and membership in a professional guild. These lead to other questions about how particular forms of authority relate to each other and, most importantly, about what other kinds of authority — and people — are being excluded. *Nostra Aetate*, for example, speaks in terms of what would be a conventional list of established religious traditions: Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism. Of course, both Clooney and Griffiths are concerned with authoritative texts and authoritative commentarial traditions. But in this day and age, the boundary between the established religion and the nascent one is changing and changeable. It is also an issue of real concern to what extent marginal or subaltern voices are considered seriously within the often contentious discussions that shape and trajectory of interreligious dialogue. *Nostra Aetate* does not have a direct answer to this question and, perhaps for this very reason, the Declaration’s reception in the West has been an almost exclusively academic matter. Christian academics, of course, can be a rather self-enclosed group. In spite of their sincere desire to be open, they can all too easily exclude other perspectives that do not align with the accepted configurations of discourse within the college, university, or seminary.

5. Conclusion

When Pope Francis spoke of Christians and atheists “meeting” in doing good, he was affirming how reason allows all humans to

apprehend the moral implications of natural law. In so doing, the Pontiff was implicitly affirming a crucial point of *Nostra Aetate* that humans do share a fundamental unity. But the newly elected pontiff was also extending the parameters of the discussion that *Nostra Aetate* encouraged. *Nostra Aetate* was able to talk in broad, hopeful, and irenic, terms about “religion” and “religion” as being undergirded by a quest for the Absolute. It is interesting to consider how dialogue would progress when both parties ask radically different kinds of questions. If *Nostra Aetate* focused on the existential questions at the heart of interreligious dialogue, Pope Francis was emphasizing practical logic. In so doing, he was not far from the position of “doing before knowing” advocated by theologians who wish to engage the new pluralism or for comparative theologians who argue for a patient deferral of truth claims so that inter-textuality can emerge. Pope Francis’s view seems to be that learning and cooperation can be forged by suspending, or bracketing, broader theological questions in an effort to focus on the practical moral demands that humans encounter in the specificity of their lives.

Perhaps the import of what the Holy Father meant was best seen during his celebration of Maundy Thursday services at an Italian juvenile detention facility. During the service, Pope Francis washed the feet of Muslims and women. As did his comment about atheists, the Holy Father’s act brought praise from some quarters and consternation from others.⁴⁵ But for me, it revealed another aspect Francis Clooney’s theologically rich discussion of the Sacred Heart of Jesus and the feet of Narayana. Recall how Clooney envisages a reciprocal appreciation of religious symbols related to materiality and God’s involvement with and in the world. Putting such an appreciation into practice can embody a dialogue no less important than the theological debates and insights of the new pluralists or comparative theologians. Indeed, if we could wash one another’s feet, in love and humility, it would be a particularly powerful way to extend the relevance of *Nostra Aetate*, into our own time.

⁴⁵William Oddie, “Washing a woman’s feet on Maundy Thursday didn’t mean that the Pope will ordain women: but it was unsettling and it does mean something,” *CatholicHerald.co.uk* (April 2, 2013), <http://www.catholicherald.co.uk/commentandblogs/2013/04/02/washing-a-womans-feet-on-maundy-thursday-didnt-mean-that-the-pope-will-ordain-women-but-it-was-unsettling-and-it-does-mean-something/>