

Interreligious Dialogue: A Roman Catholic Perspective

Gregory Baum

McGill University, Canada

Abstract:

To promote peace, justice and freedom in a deeply divided world, the Catholic Church at Vatican Council II promulgated the declaration *Nostra aetate in 1965*, expressing its respect for the world religions and recommending dialogue and cooperation with their followers. This was a startling event, since from its very beginning the Catholic Church, and in fact all the Christian Churches, wanted to convert the entire world to the Christian faith. *Nostra aetate* also transformed the relationship of the Catholic Church's to Jews and Judaism. This innovative teaching has raised theological questions that have not yet been fully answered. A certain lack of clarity has allowed some conservative Catholics to pretend the Church has not changed its mind. The present paper examines the new teaching in regard to Judaism and the world religions and record the gradual turn to greater openness on the part of Cardinal Ratzinger/Benedict XVI. That interreligious dialogue is capable of transforming the participants. Since religions also have a dark side, at times legitimating unjust regimes or fostering contempt of outsiders, it will be argued that that interreligious dialogue must also listen to the critical thinkers of the Enlightenment.

Keywords: Cardinal Ratzinger Benedict XVI; Catholic Church; Interreligious Dialogue; Judaism; Religion

Résumé:

Afin de promouvoir la paix, la justice et la liberté dans un monde divisé, l'Église catholique et le IIe concile œcuménique du Vatican a fait la promulgation de la déclaration *Nostra aetate* en 1965, exprimant son respect pour les religions du monde et recommandant le dialogue ainsi que la coopération avec leurs disciples. Ceci était un événement surprenant, car, depuis son début, l'Église catholique et toutes les églises chrétiennes voulaient convertir le monde au complet à la foi chrétienne. La *Nostra aetate* a aussi transformé la relation entre l'Église catholique et les juifs et le judaïsme. Cet enseignement innovateur a soulevé des questions théologiques qui n'ont pas encore été résolues. Un certain manque de précision a permis à certains catholiques conservateurs de faire semblant que l'Église n'a pas changé d'avis. Cet article examine les nouveaux enseignements en ce qui concerne le judaïsme et le monde religieux et fait le bilan du changement graduel vers une plus grande ouverture d'esprit de la part du cardinal Ratzinger/Benedict XVI. Ce dialogue interreligieux a la capacité de transformer les participants. Tandis que les religions ont aussi une face obscure, parfois même rendant légitime des régimes injustes ou encourageant le mépris d'autrui, il sera débattu que le dialogue interreligieux devrait aussi prendre les propos des penseurs critiques des Lumières en considération.

Mots-clés: Cardinal Ratzinger Benedict XVI; Église catholique; Interreligieux; Dialogue; Judaïsme; Religion

To promote peace, justice and freedom in a deeply divided world, the Catholic Church at Vatican Council II promulgated the declaration *Nostra aetate* in 1965, expressing its respect for the world religions and recommending dialogue and cooperation with their followers (*Nostra aetate*, 1965). This was a startling event, since from its very beginning the Catholic Church, and in fact all the Christian Churches, wanted to convert the entire world to the Christian faith. *Nostra aetate* also transformed the relationship of the Catholic Church to Jews and Judaism.

Vatican Council II had been convoked by Pope John XXIII in 1959. Because of my doctoral dissertation on an ecumenical topic, I had the honour of being appointed a *peritus* (an official theologian) at the Council's Secretariat of Christian Unity. The task of the Secretariat was the preparation of three draft documents dealing with: 1) religious liberty, 2) the ecumenical movement, and 3) the reform of the Church's relation to Judaism. The draft documents were subsequently discussed by the assembly of bishops, amended several times by the Secretariat, and eventually approved in their final form by the entire Council. In this process the draft document on Judaism was expanded, following the wishes of the bishops, to become the declaration *Nostra aetate*, redefining the Church's relationship to the world religions and recommending interreligious dialogue.

This conciliar teaching has raised theological questions that have not yet been fully answered. A certain lack of clarity has allowed some conservative Catholics to pretend the Church has not changed its mind. In the present paper I wish to examine the new teaching in

regard to Judaism and the world religions and record the gradual turn to greater openness on the part of Cardinal Ratzinger/Benedict XVI. I wish to show that interreligious dialogue is capable of transforming the participants. Since religions also have a dark side, at times legitimating unjust regimes or fostering contempt of outsiders, I will make the controversial proposal that interreligious dialogue must also listen to the critical thinkers of the Enlightenment.

Respecting Judaism

The Declaration *Nostra aetate* acknowledges that God's ancient covenant with the Jews retained its validity after the coming of Jesus. At first a good number of bishops were puzzled by this. This was indeed a novel proposition. I was aware of this because I had just published a book on what the New Testament teaches about the Jews (Baum, 1961). Since I was not trained as an exegete, I had relied in my examination on the commentaries written by well-known biblical scholars. All of them agreed on the meaning of St. Paul's message in his Letter to the Romans, claiming that the Jews continue to be loved by God for the sake of their fathers (Rom 11: 28). What St. Paul meant was that, despite their refusal to believe in Jesus, the Jews would remain God's first-chosen people: they would not lose themselves in the world, but remain distinct, preserved by God, awaiting the day of their restoration. None of the scholars I consulted suggested that the election of the Jews was *in the present* a source of grace for them. The conciliar interpretation of Romans 11 was indeed an innovation. When my book was republished after the Council, I wrote a foreword to present the conciliar teaching and then made the appropriate changes throughout the book (Baum, 1965).

It is my impression that we, at the Secretariat, offered a post-Auschwitz reading of the Pauline text: that is to say, we avoided consciously or unconsciously any interpretation of a biblical text that could legitimate the humiliation of the Jews and justify their exclusion or marginalization. The proposal of the Secretariat was endorsed by the Council.

In subsequent years, John Paul II and Benedict XVI confirmed the conciliar teaching. John Paul II honoured the Jews as "the people of God of the old covenant, never revoked by God", and "the present-day people of the covenant concluded with Moses" (John Paul II, 1980, November 17); he also called them "partners in a covenant of eternal love that has never been revoked" (John Paul II, 1987, September 11).

The Church feels obliged by her very nature to respect the covenant made by the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Indeed, the Church herself is situated within the eternal covenant of the Almighty, whose plans are immutable, and she respects the children of promise, the children of the covenant, as her brothers and sisters in faith.

(Ratzinger/Benedict XVI, 2009, May 11)

Unresolved is the question how the two covenants, the ancient and the new, are related to one another. The extended debate in regard to this issue is summarized by Cardinal Walter Kaspar (Kaspar, 2004, December 6). While theologians explain the relation between the two covenants in different ways, they all agree that the teaching of *Nostra aetate* on the abiding character of the ancient covenant has invalidated the so-called theology of substitution, taught in the Church over the centuries. According to the theology of substitution, God has rejected the chosen people because of its infidelity and, in its stead, chose the Church as the new and true Israel. This

theology held that the Jews had become blind, fallen into ignorance and been deserted by God's grace. The recognition of *Nostra aetate* that the ancient covenant remains a source of grace for the Jews implies that the Church has no mission to proclaim the gospel to the Synagogue, inviting Jews to embrace the Christian faith.

In this context I wish to mention the confusion introduced by the Instruction *Dominus Jesus*, published on August 6, 2000 by the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith and signed by its president, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger (*Dominus Jesus*, 2000). According to this Instruction, interreligious dialogue is part of the Church's evangelizing mission: Catholics involved in this dialogue are told to keep in mind that the ultimate aim of their participation is the conversion of their partners to the Catholic truth. The Jewish community was appalled by this ecclesiastical text, and Catholic theologians severely criticized it. German theologians referred to the Instruction as *Dominus Joseph*, Joseph being the Cardinal's first name. I published an article showing that the Instruction contradicted the conciliar teaching on the Church's relationship to Jews and Judaism (Baum, 2000b).

To calm his critics, Cardinal Ratzinger published the beautiful article "The Heritage of Abraham: The Gift of Christmas" in the *Osservatore Romano* of December 29, 2000, in which he describes the relationship between Judaism and Christianity: first, the affinity between them for a brief moment at the very beginning, second, the estrangement and hostility between them, causing great suffering to the Jews, and third, after the Shoah, the movement towards respect and reconciliation (Ratzinger/Benedict XVI, 2000, December 29). Here the Cardinal recognizes that dialogue with Jews is *not* oriented toward their conversion; here he corrects the message of *Dominus Jesus*. The article in *Osservatore Romano* is an echo of a longer article the Cardinal had published in *Communio* (Ratzinger/Benedict XVI, 1998), which shows that Jews and Christians worship the same God, share a spiritual patrimony, and are related to one another by the gifts they exchange: the Church receives its God from the Synagogue, and the Synagogue receives from Christians the gift that its God is being worshipped all over the world.

The question I now wish to raise is whether all Jewish-Christian dialogue is to be praised? What are we to think of the cooperation between Christian Zionists and radical Jewish circles in Israel to defend the claim that the entire biblical Israel is God's gift to the Jews? What are we to think of the learned Jewish-Christian dialogues in North America where the Israeli occupation of Palestine, like the elephant in the drawing room, is never mentioned? Since similar questions emerge in connection with other interreligious dialogues, I shall return to this topic further on.

Respect for the World's Religions

The declaration *Nostra aetate* honours the world religions, acknowledges that they share many truths and values with the Catholic Church, and even recognizes in these religions an echo of God's Word, the Word incarnate in Jesus Christ as believed by Catholics. The declaration asks Catholics to engage in dialogue and cooperation with the followers of the world religions.

Nostra aetate only hints at the theological reasoning that allows the Council to make such bold and innovative claims. According to the Logos Christology of the early Christian writers of the East, the saving Word of God, incarnate in Jesus, resounds throughout the whole of human history. The reason for this faith is the message of John's Gospel that God's Word or Logos, embodied in Jesus, is "the Light that enlightens every human coming into the world" (John, 1: 9). It follows that the divine Logos has addressed men and women from the very beginning,

speaking to them through sages or appealing directly to their personal conscience. That is why *Nostra aetate* (§ 2) can say that “the world religions often reflect a ray of the Truth that enlightens all humans”, and the conciliar document *Gaudium et spes* (*Gaudium et spes*, 1965: § 22) can say that all men and women, wherever they may be, are addressed by God’s Spirit and thus have access to the mystery of redemption. The world is indeed a place of sin, yet operative in people’s personal lives and in their traditions is God’s healing and elevating grace.

The missionaries of the past who preached the gospel in Africa, Asia and the Americas believed that they brought salvation to the pagan masses lost in sin and idolatry. In an encyclical of 1919, Benedict XV still referred to pagan people as “bound by the chains of blind and violent desires and enslaved in the most hideous of all forms of slavery, the service of Satan” (Benedict XV, 1919). *Nostra aetate* has opened a new chapter in the Church’s history: it calls upon Catholics to respect the followers of the world religions and engage in dialogue and cooperation with them. Pope Paul VI, in his introductory speech to the 4th session of the Council in 1965, made this bold affirmation: “In this world, the Church is not an end, but a means, a means in the service of the common good” (Ratzinger/Benedict XVI, 1966).

The question the Vatican Council did not resolve is how to relate interreligious dialogue to the Church’s mission to preach the gospel. Some conservative Catholics, supported by Cardinal Ratzinger’s Instruction *Dominus Jesus*, believe that for Catholics the ultimate aim of interreligious dialogue is the conversion of their partners to the Christian faith. Most Catholic theologians hold that it is deceitful and thus unethical to invite followers of another religion to a trusting dialogue with the hidden intention of persuading them to change their religion. They recall that *Nostra aetate* (§ 2) wanted Catholics to engage in dialogue and cooperation with the members of the world religions “to acknowledge, preserve and promote the spiritual and moral goods found among them as well as the values of their society and culture” The purpose of interreligious dialogue, these theologians insist, is to widen the truths and values shared by the religious traditions and thus enable them to work together serving the common good of humanity.

This was, in fact, the position adopted by Pope John Paul II. In his encyclical *Redemptoris mission* (§ 56) of 1990, he argued that the Church’s redemptive mission has two branches, the proclamation of the gospel and the engagement in interreligious dialogue, the purpose of the latter being the promotion of mutual understanding and social reconciliation. John Paul II always insisted that in a deeply divided world, torn apart by armed conflicts, economic inequalities and contradictory ideologies, the Church’s mission is to promote peace, including peace among the religions.

An unresolved theological issue, lively debated in the Church, is how to relate interreligious dialogue to the teaching of the New Testament that Jesus Christ is the unique saviour of the world, the one mediator between God and humans, the self-donation of God to the entire humanity. Christians who accept this teaching regard the Christian Church as altogether unique, as Christ’s earthly body, rejecting the relativistic idea that all religions are equally true. One solution of this dilemma is presented, as I mentioned above, in the declaration *Nostra aetate*, retrieving the ancient Christian teaching that God’s Word, incarnate in Jesus, as Catholics believe, resounds through the entire human history and is echoed in the world religions. Wherever people search for the truth and love and serve their neighbour, they respond to the prompting of God’s Word.

The issue is still an open debate in the Church and has produced an extensive theological literature. Sometimes the practice of the Church precedes its theory. It is significant that the

Catholic Church and the major Protestant Churches in Europe and North America have decided not to preach the gospel to the new non-Christian immigrants arriving in great number, but instead to respect their faith, protect them against popular prejudice and help them to feel at home in their new society ("Islam in Europe" committee, 1999).

The Education of Benedict XVI

In 1986 John Paul II had invited representatives of the world religions to join him in Assisi in a common prayer for peace. Cardinal Ratzinger had not been pleased with this gathering. He published an article expressing his fear that the joint prayer at Assisi would foster relativism among Catholics and make them forget that they were forbidden to pray with non-Christians (Ratzinger/Benedict, 2003). The Instruction *Dominus Jesus* of 2000, produced by the Cardinal, warned that interreligious dialogue fostered a relativistic attitude and undermined the Church's evangelising mission. Religious pluralism, according to the Instruction, exists only *in fact*, for *in principle* there is only one religion, Roman Catholicism.

What is remarkable is that the elevation of Cardinal Ratzinger to the papacy in 2005 led to a dramatic evolution of his understanding of interreligious dialogue, a story I wish briefly to summarise.

Right after his enthronement, Benedict XVI changed John Paul II's open policy regarding interreligious dialogue. Benedict closed down the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue set up by his Predecessor and appointed to a post in Egypt the Pontifical Council's president, Archbishop Michael Fitzgerald, a specialist in matters of Catholic-Muslims relations. The New Pope assigned interreligious activities to the Pontifical Council for Culture (Borelli, 2006, August 4). For Benedict, the encounter of the world religions produced a dialogue that was purely cultural, devoid of theological significance. He insisted, following his teaching in *Dominus Jesus*, that interreligious dialogue was part of the Church's evangelizing mission.

Benedict's refusal to recognize anything of God in the other religions explains the hostile remark he made on September 12, 2006, in Regensburg, Germany, arguing that Islam had a special relationship to violence and worshiped a divinity different from the God of Christians (Baum, 2007). The response was an outcry among Muslims and consternation among Catholics who remembered the teaching of Vatican II, confirmed by John Paul II, that Muslims and Catholics worship the same God. Benedict XVI replied to the outcry a few days later, on September 25, in a speech delivered to the ambassadors of the Muslim countries in Rome, expressing his profound respect for Islam. Two months later, on November 28, Benedict delivered a speech in Turkey, recognizing that Muslims and Catholics worship the same God and, more than that, have a common mission to give witness to the Almighty in an increasingly secular world. Catholics ask themselves whether Benedict has changed his mind, or whether he had simply become more diplomatic.

Already one month after Benedict's hostile remark at Regensburg, on October 12, 2006, a group of 38 distinguished Muslim leaders and scholars published an Open Letter to the Pope (Open Letter, 2006), written without polemics, that appreciated his respect for Islam, politely corrected his mistaken notions and invited him and his Church to enter more deeply into dialogue with Muslims. In the Open Letter Muslims representing different streams in the Muslim tradition were able to express the meaning of Islam in a single voice. The publication of the Open Letter started a movement among Muslim scholars exploring the truth and values shared by Islam and Christianity, a movement that produced a year later, in October 2007, the

comprehensive statement *A Common Word between You and Us* (A common word, 2009), signed by over 130 Muslim leaders and thinkers. The final version of *A Common Word* was presented at a conference held at the Royal Academy for Islamic Thought in Jordan, under the patronage of King Abdullah II. Since then, *A Common Word* has since been signed by hundreds of Muslims and Christians.

A Common Word recognizes that Muslims and Christians constitute over half of the world population and that there can be no peace in the world unless there is peace among Muslims and Christians. Mutual respect and cooperation between Muslims and Christians is possible, because both religions have the same essential message calling for the love of God and the love of neighbour. The statement shows that this is the teaching of the New Testament, expressing the principal message of Jesus to his disciples; it also shows that the double call to love God and the neighbour is the teaching of the Koran, not in precisely these words, not at the centre as in the New Testament, yet implicit in a wide set of exhortations that summon Muslims to trust and love their God and respect, help, and love their neighbour.

A Common Word persuaded Benedict XVI to promote dialogue with Islam. In March 8, 2008, he gave his approval for the establishment of a permanent forum for Catholic-Muslim dialogue, and on November 4 of the same year, an official dialogue between Catholics and Muslims was held at Rome (Ratzinger/Benedict XVI, 2009).

The positive attitude of these Muslim leaders had an impact on Benedict's understanding of interreligious dialogue. Addressing a circle of Jews, Christians and Muslims in Jerusalem on May 11, 2009, the Pope, dropping his fear of relativism, recognized the importance of dialogue and cooperation among the followers of these three religions.

While the differences we explore in interreligious dialogue may at times appear as barriers, they need not overshadow the common sense of awe and respect for the universal, for the absolute and for truth, which impel religious peoples to converse with one another. . . . Indeed it is the shared conviction that these transcendent realities have their source in—and bear traces of—the Almighty that believers uphold before each other . . . and before the world. Together we proclaim that God exists and can be known, that the earth is his creation, that we are his creatures, and that he calls every man and woman to a way of life that respects his design for the world.

(Ratzinger/Benedict XVI, 2009)

Here Benedict no longer claims that interreligious dialogue brackets the truth question. He tells his listeners that their dialogue deals with the truth, the practical truth which is the ethical foundation of every society and enables people of different religions to dwell together in peace. He says:

Friends, if we believe we have a criterion of discernment which is divine in origin and intended for all humanity, then we cannot tire of bringing that knowledge to bear on civic life. Truth should be offered to all; it serves all members of society. It sheds light on the foundation of morality and ethics, and suffuses reason with the strength to reach beyond its own limitations in order to give expression to our deepest common aspirations. Far from threatening the tolerance of differences or

cultural plurality, truth makes consensus possible and keeps public debate rational, honest and accountable, and opens the gateway to peace.

(Ratzinger/Benedict XVI, 2009)

Benedict distinguishes between two kinds of truth: first, the practical truth available to human reason enlightened by religious faith that constitutes the foundation of a just and peaceful world order, and second, the metaphysical truth hinted at in all religions, the recognition of an unknowable transcendent mystery sustaining the visible world. He now recognizes that both of these truths are topics of interreligious dialogue.

The Ratzinger/Benedict of the Instruction *Dominus Jesus* was afraid that interreligious dialogue would foster relativism. He feared that if Catholics, the bearers of the truth, regarded their partner in dialogue as equals, this would implicitly affirm that all religions are equally true. While still rejecting relativism, the Pope has adopted a positive approach to religious pluralism.

In September 2010, addressing a gathering of religious representatives at St. Mary's University College near London, England, Benedict acknowledged first that interreligious dialogue illuminates the truth available to reason that makes a just and peaceful world possible. He then added that all religions are in search of another truth, namely the ultimate meaning of human existence, and while we, belonging to different religions, have different ideas about this truth, we are all seekers together. "On the spiritual level, all of us, in our different ways, are personally engaged in a journey that grants an answer to the most important question of all – the question concerning the ultimate meaning of human existence" (Ratzinger/Benedict XVI, 2010). While Catholics profess the truth, Benedict now teaches, they remain seekers; their quest for truth continues and will never stop; and this they share with followers of the other religions. We are seekers together. Relying on the theology of St. Augustine, Benedict recognizes that no one possesses the truth, but the truth possesses us. Even in interreligious dialogue, he said, "the initiative lies not with us, but with the Lord: it is not so much we who are seeking him, but rather he who is seeking us" (Ibid).

Ratzinger/Benedict's understanding of interreligious dialogue has evolved from the suspicion expressed in the Instruction *Dominus Jesus* to the recognition of both its urgency at the present time and its rich theological meaning for all participants, including Catholics.

This new openness to interreligious dialogue persuaded King Abdullah II of Jordan that the Catholic Church would support the proposal he submitted to the United Nations on October 20, 2010, the establishment of a World Interfaith Harmony Week every year in the first week of February (World interfaith harmony week, 2010). This proposal, supported by about twenty countries as well as by the Vatican, was accepted by the United Nations on the same day. The King's personal envoy, Prince Ghazi bin Muhammad, introduced the proposal by a remarkable speech. In it he mentions the Second Vatican Council as the starting point of a movement of interreligious dialogues that produced the shared conviction that the time has come for the worldwide promotion of religious harmony.

I wish to quote two paragraphs of his speech:

As this august assembly is well aware, our world is rife with religious tension and, sadly, mistrust, dislike and hatred. These religious tensions can easily erupt into communal violence. They also facilitate the demonizing of the other which in turn predisposes public opinion to support war against peoples of other religions. . . . The misuse or abuse of religions can thus be a cause of world strife, whereas

religions should be a great foundation for facilitating world peace. The remedy for this problem can only come from the world's religions themselves. Religions must be part of the solution, not part of the problem.

Much good work has already been done towards this starting really with the Second Vatican Council from 1962-1965 by hundreds of intra-faith and interfaith groups all over the world and of all religions. Yet the forces inciting inter-religious tensions (notable among them being religious fundamentalisms of various kinds) are better organized, more experienced, better coordinated, more motivated and more ruthless. They have more stratagems, more institutes, more money, and more power and garner more publicity such that they by far outweigh all the positive work done by the various interfaith initiatives. The sad proof of this is that religious tensions are on the rise, not on the decline.

(bin Muhammad, 2010)

Prince Ghazi bin Muhammad also explained why the proposal uses the Confucian concept of "harmony". Speaking of tolerance might be interpreted as the toleration of others who are inferior; speaking of acceptance could be interpreted as accepting the faith of the other; speaking of peace could mean simply the absence of conflict. The Confucian idea of harmony, he said, includes dynamic interaction. The Vatican's Permanent Observer at the United Nations approved of the proposal, yet he would have preferred replacing the word harmony by dialogue.

The Dialogue of Religions Purifies and Enriches Them

By carefully listening to the Other, Catholics discover not only that they have been ignorant, but also that they have inherited many prejudices. In interreligious dialogue they become aware that their tradition is the bearer of lies and falsifications. To protect their own truth, they have drawn distorted images of the Other. Respectful attention to the Other now allows them to purify their tradition. Interreligious dialogue allows all participants to see their own tradition in a new light.

By listening to a learned Jewish author Catholics have become aware of the ambiguity of their tradition. The book *Jésus et Israël* written during World War II by Jules Isaac, a French historian of Jewish origin, was the first major study of the New Testament that focused on the passages expressing contempt for the Jews and their religion. (Isaac, 1948) Jules Isaac survived in hiding during the German occupation, while his wife and daughter were arrested and transported to the death camps. Asking himself where the hatred of the Jews came from, he discovered in the New Testament and the early Christian authors an anti-Jewish rhetoric that subsequently became part of the Christian tradition. His book, published after the war, had an impact first on a small circle of Christian scholars and eventually summoned forth a movement in the Christian Churches to correct this century-old discourse. Already in 1947, in the Swiss town of Seelisberg, Jules Isaac participated with a group of Catholic and Protestant biblical scholars in the elaboration of ten hermeneutical points that would purify the preaching of gospel of its prejudiced rhetoric. When Jules Isaac visited Pope John XXIII in 1960, the Pope promised him that the Vatican Council would reform the Church's relation to the Jews and Judaism. In fact, the ten points of Seelisberg had an influence on the declaration *Nostra aetate*.

Edward Said's *Orientalism*, published in 1978, revealing the distorted image of the East in the literature of the West, prompted Christian theologians to engage in dialogue with Muslim

thinkers to overcome their prejudices. For me personally it was the spread of anti-Muslim prejudice after September 11, 2001, that urged me to study Islamic thought and listen to contemporary Muslim thinkers faithful to their tradition and willing to respond to the challenge of modernity. In fact, I decided to write a book on the theology of Tariq Ramadan (Baum, 2009), a theologian who has been severely criticized in France by journalists who have never read his books, relying simply on newspapers and television interviews. Ramadan's intellectual effort to confront the challenge of modernity made me aware that the above-mentioned statement *A Common Word*, while admirable, omits any reference to the cultural conditions of the present. Christian-Muslim dialogue becomes more creative when it deals with the questions raised by contemporary secular society.

Listening to Jews and Muslims has allowed Christians to discover their inherited prejudices and purify their tradition. In recent years, Christians have also engaged in dialogue with the religions of South East Asia, thus gaining a better understanding of the complexities of Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism, Janism, Confucianism, and Taoism.

The dialogue of religions not only purifies them, it also enriches them. It helps them to explore their potential for empathy, tolerance, peace-making and universal solidarity. A good example is the change of heart experienced by Benedict XVI in response to the initiative of thoughtful Muslim leaders. He now admits that it is possible to affirm the Catholic truth and reject relativism, and at the same time recognize that in interreligious dialogue all participants, including Catholics, are seekers, ready to respect, help and appreciate one another.

When dialogue leads us to admire insights and values found in other religious traditions, theological reflection may reveal that these insights and values are in keeping with our own tradition and thus can become part of us. A striking example is the new openness of the Catholic Church to the spirituality of the Native peoples in Canada. While in the past Catholic Natives were strictly forbidden to have recourse to their inherited symbols and rituals, today, as a result of dialogue and reflection, they may express their spirituality and practice their rites within the Catholic liturgy (John Paul II, 1984, September 10). The attention to body posture and physical exercise of the East Asian religions has had an effect on Christian religious practices, especially in the monastic communities (Blée, 2011).

Let me add that it is still an unresolved question in Catholic theology whether the Church should regard the plurality of religions as part of God's plan and hence rejoice in it, or whether this plurality is a fault line of history and hence a source of sadness for the Church.

So far I have spoken mainly of the transforming impact of interreligious dialogue. Yet I cannot avoid raising the question whether all interreligious dialogue and cooperation should be praised. Should we be pleased that at the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995, Catholic and Muslim representatives worked together to block the recognition of gender equality? Should we be glad that Catholic bishops and Mormon leaders cooperated in the fall of 2008 to defeat the referendum on same-sex marriage in California? Should we admire the speech of Nicolas Sarkozy, then-President of France, delivered in Riyadh to the shura advisory in council of Saudi Arabia in January 2008, in which he flattered the government by showing the affinity between Christianity and Islam, without any reference to the narrow Wahhabism practiced in Saudi Arabia and exported across the world? These questions oblige me to reflect on religion in the light of critical thought.

Dialogue with Thinkers of the Enlightenment

That religion calls for critical reflection is beyond doubt. Only too often do the religions divide humanity between the elect and the non-elect, between “us” and “them”, between the community that holds the truth and the rest of the world caught in error. The religions have a strong potential for creating conflict. They often encourage ignorance, superstition, prejudice and contempt for outsiders; they often legitimate violence, bless armed struggles, justify wars and feed fanaticism. The present-day spread of fundamentalism in all religious traditions and the multiplication of religious violence are disturbing phenomena that have attracted the attention of scholars of religious studies. Typical of this new literature is Mark Juergenmeyer’s *Terror in the Mind of God: the Global Rise of Religious Violence*. After the attack of September 11, 2001, a graffiti painted on the wall of the Presbyterian College on the campus of McGill University announced in large letters religion kills. Many people have become afraid of religion.

That religion is an ambivalent historical phenomenon with luminous and sinister dimensions must not be forgotten in interreligious dialogue. We may not speak of religion as if it is always a good thing. Statements like the above-mentioned *A Common Word* and other joint interreligious declarations make no reference to the conflicts and hostilities on the ground. These statements express what the religions *want* to be, not what they actually *are*. Many people in the Middle East were actually displeased with *A Common Word*: some Muslims looked upon it as a diplomatic gesture to please the West, not as an imperative to welcome their Christian neighbours. And some Christians were offended by the statement since it disguises the discrimination inflicted upon them by the Muslim majority.

A more honest approach is taken in the 1974 Louvain Declaration of the World Conference of Religions for Peace (Louvain Declaration, 1974). Here the representatives of the world religions, including the Catholic Church, admit that their traditions have often supported unjust rulers and blessed violent aggression, yet since the most authentic values of their traditions foster justice and peace, they now commit themselves to promote these values in their own society.

Religions find it difficult publicly to confess their dark side. After the Council of Trent in the 16th century, the Catholic Church presented itself as a holy Church, without acknowledging its infidelities. Catholics were sinners, to be sure, but the Church as the bride of Christ remained pure. Even at Vatican Council II, the Church still hesitated to acknowledge its collective transgressions. This changed on March 20, 2000, when John Paul II held a solemn penitential service in Rome, attended by the members of the Curia, confessing the sins of the Church and asking for divine forgiveness and the renewal of life (Baum, 2000a). The Pope presented the Church’s sins in six categories: 1) sins committed in the service of the truth, 2) sins that have harmed the unity of Christ’s body, 3) sins against the people of Israel, 4) sins committed against love, peace, the rights of peoples and respect for cultures and religions, 5) sins against the dignity of women and the unity of the human race, and 6) sins in relation to the fundamental rights of persons. Yet because Catholics believe that God is compassionate and that Jesus embraces his Church in the power of his Spirit, the Pope holds that the sinful Church is at the same time the holy Church. The Christian authors of the early centuries actually confessed their faith in the Church in paradoxical terms, calling it simultaneously sinful and holy, unfaithful and faithful, or even *casta meretrix* (the chaste whore) (Balthasar, 1967).

After the murderous crimes committed during World War II, Christian theologians began critically to examine their Scriptures, to find whether and to what extent certain biblical passages

actually encourage violence and wars. The biblical story of the plagues which God inflicted upon the Egyptians and Joshua's violent conquest of the Promised Land can easily be read as a divine blessing of violence and wars. But is this the true meaning of these passages? Deeply troubled by the violent world in which we live, the Italian theologian Giuseppe Barbaglio wrote "À un Dieu violent correspondra un monde violent et vice versa" (Barbaglio, 1994). In his book *Dieu est-il violent?*, he argues that the understanding of God evolved in the source of sacred history, eventually arriving at the insight that God is pure goodness, acting graciously and non-violently in people's lives. Many Christians share this conviction (Muller, 2009b). Believing in the words of Jesus that "God is love" (1 John 4:8) and agreeing with the liturgical antiphon "Ubi caritas et amor, Deus ibi est" (where charity and love are practiced, God is present), these Christians refuse to interpret literally the biblical references to the God of legions, the warrior God. Already in antiquity, Christian authors interpreted in a spiritual or allegorical manner the biblical passages at odds with the principal biblical teaching. Readers of Saint Augustine's *Confessions*, written at the end of the 4th century, may remember that Augustine, disturbed by biblical passages regarded by him as unworthy, was greatly relieved when he heard the preaching of St. Ambrose in Milan, who gave these passages an allegorical meaning (Augustine, 1961). Today many Christians agree that the biblical God is good and gracious and assign the violent passages to an early phase of biblical revelation now left behind (Baum, 1970).

However high the religious ideal, we may not overlook the sinister side of religion. Not to obliterate the ambivalent character of religion, I made a proposal at the Congress of the World's Religions after 9/11, held in Montreal in 2007, that interreligious dialogue be extended to include listening to the Enlightenment critics of religions and wrestling with the challenge of modernity (Baum, 2007).

By modernity I mean the ambivalent new culture produced by technology, science, a maximizing economy, democratic pluralism, human rights and religious liberty, a Western phenomenon with roots in Hellenism, Christianity, Judaism and Islam. The present-day globalization of this new culture challenges all societies, including their religions. In 1948 Arnold Toynbee argued that religious cultures react to this challenge in one of two ways: they either cling rigidly to their inherited practices or they surrender themselves to the invasion of modernity. In either case, he thought, they would disappear. (Toynbee, 1948) Yet in 1965, Robert Bellah, commenting on sociological research done on religious currents in South East Asia, proposed a different thesis (Bellah, 1965). He concluded that some religious leaders resist the impact of modernity by clinging rigidly to the inherited forms—he called this neo-traditionalism—while other religious leaders, challenged by modernity, reread their classical sacred texts and find in them inspiration to react creatively to the new historical context. Since 1965, Bellah's thesis has been verified many times by the turn to fundamentalism on the one hand and creative reinterpretations on the other.

After the Catholic No to modernity in the 19th and early 20th century, rejecting human rights, religious liberty and the separation of Church and State, Vatican Council II, relying on wide-spread progressive currents in the Church, said a critical Yes to modern society, supporting its democratic aspirations, while remaining critical of unregulated capitalism and its individualistic and consumer-oriented culture. Other religions also wrestle with modernity in a creative way. I have been particularly interested in the creative theology of contemporary Muslim thinkers. Because innovative responses are also made by the East Asian religions, sociologists have begun to speak of multiple modernities (Eisenstadt, 2002).

I was surprised to discover Benedict XVI agrees that interreligious dialogue must include listening to the enlightenment. He mentioned this with special reference to Islam in the pre-Christmas address to the Roman Curia:

In a dialogue to be intensified with Islam, we must bear in mind the fact that the Muslim world today is finding itself faced with an urgent task. This task is very similar to the one that has been imposed upon Christians since the Enlightenment, and to which the Second Vatican Council, as the fruit of long and difficult research, found real solutions for the Catholic Church. It is a question of the attitude that the community of the faithful must adopt in the face of the convictions and demands strengthened in the Enlightenment. On the one hand, we must counter a dictatorship of positivist reason that excludes God from the life of the community and from public organizations, thereby depriving humans of his specific criteria of judgment. On the other hand, one must welcome the true conquests of the Enlightenment, human rights and especially the freedom of faith and its practice, and recognize these as being essential elements for the authenticity of religion. As the Christian community has long searched for the correct position of faith in relation to such beliefs—a search that will never be concluded once and for all—so must the Islamic world with its own tradition face the immense task of finding the appropriate solutions in this regard. . . . We Christians are in solidarity with all those who, on the basis of their Muslim faith, work . . . for the synergy between faith and reason and between religion and freedom.

(Ratzinger/Benedict XVI, 2006, December 22)

Interreligious dialogue, I wish to argue, should include dialogue with the thinkers of the enlightenment. While this proposal is not accepted by all, it deserves to be debated.

Karl Marx was mistaken when he saw religion simply as an ideology legitimating the domination of the rich and powerful and consoling the simple people with the hope of eternal life. Yet dialogue with Marx allows a religious community to discover whether and to what extent it sustains institutions of injustice and inequality. Auguste Comte was mistaken when he saw religion as primitive science to be replaced by the sciences of modernity. Yet dialogue with Comte allows a religion to discover to what extent it still resists the modern sciences. Sigmund Freud was mistaken when he saw religion as the infantile dream of a good father in the sky, expressing a neurotic refusal of growing up. Yet dialogue with Freud allows religions to discover to what extent they infantilize their members and make them afraid to think for themselves. Freud was also mistaken when he diagnosed regular religious practice as an obsessional neurosis. Yet listening to him allows religious people to discover to what extent they perform rituals that are meaningless to them. Nietzsche admired Jesus, but he thought that the Christian religion, glorifying humility and meekness, expressed the resentment of the weak and timid against the strong, the imaginative and the adventurous. Nietzsche was mistaken, yet listening to him may be spiritually useful for people of faith.

At the same time, religious people are keenly aware that Enlightenment and modernity have their own dark side. They have had destructive consequences: the domination of instrumental reason and the exclusion of ethical reason from public life. Since religious people have inherited a substantive ethics, they read with sympathy the critique of modernity offered by

the Frankfurt School of social thought. In his encyclical on hope, Benedict XVI even quotes Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, the founders of the Frankfurt School. (Ratzinger/Benedict XVI, 2007) These philosophers called for the retrieval of ethics, yet since they did not see any cultural resources for such an ethical flowering, they became extremely pessimistic. The Enlightenment, they argued, has become an obstacle to universal human emancipation.

Many religious thinkers, including the present Pope, believe that the religious traditions offer resources for an ethical renewal of contemporary society. Given the unjust distribution of wealth and power in the world, the grave threat to the natural environment and the approaching end of fuel oil, the reform of present-day society demands nation and class-transcending solidarity and a culture of modesty and self-limitation, commitments that presuppose great ethical passion. Such passion, religious believers hold, is a divine gift, mediated by their faith.

References

- A common word. (2009). Retrieved December 15, 2010, from <http://www.acommonword.com>.
- Augustine, Saint. (1961). *Confessions*. London: Penguin Books.
- Balthasar, Urs von. (1991). *Explorations in theology*. San Francisco: Ignatius.
- Barbaglio, Giuseppe. (1994). *Dieu est-il violent?* Paris: Le Seuil.
- Baum, Gregory. (1961). *The Jews and the Gospel*. London: Newman Press.
- Baum, Gregory. (1965). *Is the new testament antisemitic?* New York: Paulist Press.
- Baum, Gregory. (1970). *Man becoming*. New York: Herder & Herder.
- Baum, Gregory. (2000a). An extraordinary ecclesiastical event. *The Ecumenist*, 37, 16-18.
- Baum, Gregory. (2000b). The theology of Cardinal Ratzinger: A response to *Dominus Jesus*. *The Ecumenist*, 37, 1-3.
- Baum, Gregory. (2009). *The theology of Tariq Ramadan*. Toronto: Novalis.
- Baum, Gregory. (2007). *Signs of the times*. Toronto: Novalis.
- Bellah, Robert N. (1965). Epilogue: Religion and progress in southern Asia. In Robert N. Bellah (Ed.), *Religion and progress in modern Asia* (pp. 168-229). New York: Free Press.
- Benedict XV. (1919). Encyclical *Maximum illud*, # 13.
- bin Muhammad, Ghazi. (2010). H.R.H. Prince Ghazi bin Muhammad delivers King's world interfaith harmony week proposal at UN. Retrieved December 15, 2010, from <http://www.acommonword.com/en/component/content/article/421.html>.
- Blée, Fabrice. (2011). *The third desert: The story of monastic interreligious dialogue*. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press.
- Borelli, John. (2006, August 4). From Tiber to Nile. *The Tablet*.

- Dominus Iesus*. (2000). The instruction on the Unicity and Salvific universality of Jesus Christ and the church. The Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith, chaired by Cardinal Ratzinger. Retrieved December 15, 2010, from http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20000806_dominus-iesus_en.html.
- Eisenstadt, Shmuel. (2002). *Multiple modernities conference 2001*. London: Brill.
- Gaudium et spes. (1965). The pastoral constitution on the church in the modern world. Vatican Council II. Retrieved December 15, 2010, from http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_cons_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html.
- Isaac, Jules. (1948). *Jésus et Israël*. Paris. Fasquelle.
- “Islam in Europe” committee. (1999). Retrieved December 15, 2010, from http://www.ccc-kek.org/content/islam_eu.shtml.
- John Paul II. (1980, November 17). Address to the Jewish community in Mainz, Germany.
- John Paul II. (1984, Septembre 10). Discours aux Amérindiens et aux Inuits au Sanctuaire de Sainte Anne de Beauprés.
- John Paul II. (1987, September 11). Address to Jewish leaders in Miami, USA.
- Kaspar, Cardinal W. (2004, December 6). The relationship of the old and the new covenant as one of the central issues in Jewish-Christian dialogue. Retrieved December 15, 2010, from <http://www.ccr.us/dialogika-resources/documents-and-statements/roman-catholic/kasper/652-kasper04dec6>.
- Louvain Declaration. (1974). Retrieved December 15, 2010, from www.google.ca/search?client=firefox-a&rls=org.mozilla%3Aen-GB%3Aofficial&channel=s&hl=fr&source=hp&q=World+Conference+of+Religions+for+peace++Louvain+Declaration+1974+&meta=&btnG=Recherche+Google.
- Muller, Jean-Marie. (2009). *Désarmer les dieux*. Éditions du Relié, Gordes, France.
- Nostra aetate*. (1965). The declaration on the church’s relation to the non-Christian religions. Vatican Council II. Retrieved December 15, 2010, from http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651028_nostra-aetate_en.html.
- Open letter. (2006). Open letter to His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI”. *The Ecumenist*, 43, 1-6.
- Ratzinger/Benedict XVI. (1966). *Theological highlights of Vatican II*. New York: Paulist Press.
- Ratzinger/Benedict XVI. (1998). Interreligious dialogue and Jewish-Christian relations. *Communio*, 30, 29-40.
- Ratzinger/Benedict XVI. (2000, December 29). *Osservatore Romano*.
- Ratzinger/Benedict XVI. (2001). The heritage of Abraham: The gift of Christmas. *The Ecumenist*, 38, 12-13.
- Ratzinger/Benedict XVI. (2003). *Glaube-Wahrheit-Tolerance*. Freiburg: Herder.

Ratzinger/Benedict XVI. (2006, December 22). Benedict XVI meets Roman Curia for Christmas greetings.

Ratzinger/Benedict XVI. (2007). Encyclical *Spe salvi*, # 22.

Ratzinger/Benedict XVI. (2009, May 11). Meeting with organizations involved in interreligious dialogue at the auditorium of Notre Dame Center in Jerusalem.

Ratzinger/Benedict XVI. (2009, Sept. 12). Address to the Jewish community in Paris, France.

Ratzinger/Benedict XVI. (2010, September 17). Address to religious leaders at St. Mary's University College, England.

Toynbee, Arnold J. (1948). Islam, the west and the future. In Arnold J. Toynbee (Ed). *Civilisation on trial*. London: Oxford University Press.

World interfaith harmony week. (2010). Retrieved December 15, 2010, from <http://worldinterfaithharmonyweek.com/>.

About the Author

Gregory Baum was Professor of Theology and Sociology at University of Saint Michael's College in the University of Toronto and subsequently Professor of Theological Ethics at McGill University's Faculty of Religious Studies. Dr. Baum is currently associated with the Jesuit Centre *justice et foi* in Montreal. During the Council Vatican II, he was a *peritus*, or theological advisor, at the Ecumenical Secretariat, the commission responsible for three conciliar documents, On Religious Liberty, On Ecumenism, and On the Church's Relation to Non-Christian Religions. From 1962 to 2004, he was the Editor of *The Ecumenist*, a review of theology, culture, and society.

Citing this paper:

Baum, Gregory. (2011). Interreligious dialogue: A Roman Catholic perspective. *Global Media Journal -- Canadian Edition*, 4(1), 5-20.