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Lumen Gentium 16 Anonymous Christians, Pelagianism, and Islam

Eduardo J. Echeverria

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Introduction

A recent article by Professor John V. Fesko of Westminster Theological Seminary in Pro Rege (September 2011) answers the question regarding the relevance of J. Gresham Machen (1881-1937), particularly his response to theological liberalism and its antithesis to the Gospel of Christ. Catholic Christians will find much to agree with in this article about Machen, especially Fesko’s exhortation to stand with Machen against theological liberalism: “Machen’s stand against liberalism must be our stand against the same, and we must fight the battle with the same weapons: the Word of God and the gospel of Jesus Christ.” Can I get a witness? I, for one, say Amen!

Significantly, although Professor Fesko does not mention this fact, Machen aligns himself with Roman Catholics, finding common ground with them, in his stand against liberalism. Machen, entangled in a controversy with the Protestant liberal thought of the Presbyterianism of his day, observed, in what is rightly regarded to be a classic of American evangelical thought, namely, Christianity and Liberalism (1923), that a wide “gulf” existed between evangelical Protestantism and Roman Catholic thought. “But,” he quickly adds, “profound as it is, it seems almost trifling compared to the abyss which stands between us and the ministers of our own [Presbyterian] tradition.” He continues, “How great is the common heritage which unites the Catholic Church, with its maintenance of the authority of Holy Scripture and with its acceptance of the great early creeds, to devout Protestants today?” There is no false irenicism in Machen’s statement, but only a mere acknowledgment of the common heritage of faith between evangelical Protestants and Catholics regarding biblical authority and the Christological and Trinitarian dogmas of the early church, particularly the early ecumenical councils of Nicea,
Constantinople, Ephesus, and Chalcedon.

Among Reformed Protestants, Machen was not alone in theologically aligning himself with Roman Catholics against liberalism and secularism. Dordt College, an institution of higher education that stands in the Reformed tradition, especially the Dutch neo-Calvinism of Abraham Kuyper (1837-1920), will appreciate that Kuyper himself wrote in his famous 1898 Princeton Stone Lectures, Lectures on Calvinism, about his ecumenical alliance with Catholics. Here, too, there is no false irenicism on Kuyper’s part. He just gives a very articulate statement, not only of the common heritage of faith shared by Reformed Christians with the tradition of Catholic Christianity but also of the common spiritual enemy of both. Kuyper wrote,

Now, in this conflict [with theological liberalism and secularism] Rome is not an antagonist, but stands on our side, inasmuch as she also recognizes and maintains the Trinity, the Deity of Christ, the Cross as an atoning sacrifice, the Scriptures as the Word of God, and the Ten Commandments as a divinely-imposed rule of life. Therefore, let me ask if Romish theologians take up the sword to do valiant and skilful battle against the same tendency that we ourselves mean to fight to the death, is it not the part of wisdom to accept the valuable help of their elucidation?... I for my part am not ashamed to confess that on many points my views have been clarified through my study of the Romish theologians.4

Perhaps Professor Fesko would acknowledge the “ecumenical hospitality” shown by Machen and Kuyper, even while he warns his fellow evangelical and Reformed Protestants in our times about the “alarming trend...growing within the broader church, even within the walls of evangelicalism,” namely, the claim that the controversy between Reformation and Rome is over.5 This is not the place to give a Roman Catholic assessment of the state of the question regarding this controversy.6 Fesko’s own summary judgment on this issue is that, if anything, the “gulf” between Rome and, in particular, evangelical and Reformed Protestants, has widened since the first half of the twentieth-century.7

Yes, he acknowledges change within the Catholic Church with Vatican II, “but it is not a change for the better.” In particular, “the official teaching of the Roman Catholic Church has become worse than anything that the Council of Trent ever said on salvation and the doctrine of justification.” Rome endorses not only the teaching of Trent but also “the doctrine of the ‘anonymous Christian’.” In its theology of religions, Fesko adds that Vatican II promotes “salvation by good works,” and, in particular, Rome has now turned from semi-Pelagianism to an unmitigated Pelagianism: “Rome once had semi-Pelagius upon its throne, but he has now abdicated his place of honor to his father, Pelagius.”8 Furthermore, according to Fesko, Vatican II’s theology of religions claims that there is no difference between the God of the Bible and the God of Islam. Fesko claims to derive all this—the idea of anonymous Christians, Pelagianism, and the relation between the God of Islam and of the Bible—from Vatican II’s Lumen Gentium (hereafter LG), the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, in particular paragraph 16.9 Since this paragraph, which I have broken up into 16a, 16b and 16c, is central to Professor Fesko’s charges against the Catholic Church, quoting it in full is necessary in order to give an assessment of his charges.10

In light of St. Paul’s statement that God our Savior desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth (1 Tim 2:1-4), LG 16a deals with the closeness of those who do not belong to the Church but who are in varying degrees related to her, as is Judaism, in terms of the salvation-historical continuity between Judaism and Christianity, “their common spiritual patrimony,”11 as the Council put it, or Islam’s monotheistic faith and the theology of creation it entails, and so forth; 16b addresses the question regarding the conditions on how salvation might be possible for those who have not heard the Gospel, the unevangelized, through no fault of their own; and 16c addresses the matter of why “very often” those conditions are not met:

[a] Those who have not yet received the Gospel are related in various ways to the people of God. There is, first, that people to which the covenants and promises were made, and from which Christ was born according to the flesh (cf. Rom 9:4-5): in view of the divine choice, they are a people most dear for the sake of the fathers, for the gifts of God are without
repentance (cf. Rom 11:29-36). But the plan of salvation also includes those who acknowledge the Creator. In the first place amongst whom are the Moslems: these profess to hold the faith of Abraham, and together with us they adore the one, merciful God, mankind’s judge on the last day. Nor is God remote from those who in shadows and images seek the unknown God, since He gives to all men life and breath and all things (cf. Acts 17:25-28), and as Savior wills that all men be saved (cf. 1 Tim 2:4).

Significantly, although Professor Fesko does not mention this fact, Machen aligns himself with Roman Catholics, finding common ground with them, in his stand against liberalism.

[b] Those who, through no fault of their own, do not know the Gospel of Christ or His Church, but who nevertheless seek God with a sincere heart, and moved by grace, try in their actions to do His will as they know it through the dictates of their conscience—those too may achieve eternal salvation. Nor shall Divine Providence deny the assistance necessary for salvation to those who, without any fault of theirs, have not yet arrived at an explicit knowledge of God, and who, not without His grace, strive to live a good life. Whatever good or truth is found amongst them is considered by the Church to be a preparation for the Gospel and given by Him who enlightens all men so that they may finally have life.

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

I intend this article to be a response to Professor Fesko’s interpretation of LG 16. It purports to be an exercise in authentic ecumenism at the service of the truth, as the epigraph to this article puts it. I will direct myself only to his charges against Vatican II by rebutting them and offering an alternative interpretation of LG 16. My argument proceeds in three, relatively brief movements. First, I distinguish three Reformed attitudes toward Roman Catholicism and ask where Fesko might be among those distinctions. Next, guided by the 1985 Extraordinary Synod of the Catholic Church on the question of the reception of Vatican II twenty years after the close of the Council, I set forth some hermeneutical principles regarding the interpretation of the Council’s documents. My third section rebuts Fesko’s charges that Vatican II “promotes” (his word) the doctrine of anonymous Christians, adopts a full-blown Pelagianism, and that its theology of religions entails that the God of Islam and of the Bible is one and wholly the same.

Reformed Attitudes toward Roman Catholicism

One of the necessary conditions for the practice of authentic ecumenism, according to Vatican II’s Decree on Ecumenism, Unitatis Redintegratio, is to make “every effort to eliminate words, judgments, and actions which do not respond to the condition of separated brethren with truth and fairness and so make mutual relations between them more difficult.” This is a mutually reciprocal condition holding for all Christians engaged in ecumenical, inter-confessional dialogue. In order to put this condition into practice, John Paul II explains, “It is necessary to pass from antagonism and conflict to a situation where each party recognizes the other as a partner. When undertaking dialogue, each side must presuppose in the other a desire for reconciliation, for unity in truth.” In recognizing the other as a partner in ecumenical conversation, each must, at the very minimum, recognize the other as a fellow believer...
Those in the Reformed tradition who have undertaken inter-confessional dialogue under that condition have engaged (1) “in a fresh constructive and critical evaluation both of the contemporary teaching and practice of the Roman Catholic Church and of the classical controverted issues.” But there are others in that tradition who do not recognize Catholics as ecumenical partners, brethren in Christ, because they either (2) “remain to be convinced that the modern developments of the Roman Catholic Church have really addressed the issues of the Reformation,” or (3) “they have been largely untouched by the ecumenical exchanges of recent times and have therefore not been challenged or encouraged to reconsider their traditional stance.” Where does Fesko belong in this scheme of things?

Missing from Professor Fesko’s brief remarks on Vatican II is the “ecumenical hospitality” exhibited by Machen and Kuyper. What we find on his part is an exclusively antithetical attitude toward Roman Catholicism. He seems, for either the second or third reason above, not to have passed from antagonism and conflict to “a desire for reconciliation, for unity in truth.” Why is this so?

Briefly, I suggest that an answer can be found in the statement of resolutions drawn up by Michael Horton, Fesko’s colleague at Westminster Theological Seminary, in response to the 1994 ecumenical alliance of Evangelicals and Catholics Together, which affirms the substance of historic Christian orthodoxy as expressed in the Ecumenical Creeds of Nicaea and Chalcedon. In the fourth resolution we find the statement that “the creedal consensus that binds orthodox Evangelicals and Roman Catholics together warrants the making of common cause on moral and cultural issues in society” but not “cooperation among Christians as common ecclesial action in fulfilling a common ecclesial mission.” Referring to Evangelicals and Catholics Together, Horton denies that this alliance expresses a common ecclesial action, fulfilling a common ecclesial mission among brothers and sisters in Christ; Horton’s denial, and that of the other signatories to this statement of resolutions, can only mean that Evangelicals and Roman Catholics are not in fellowship with each other, even imperfectly by the grace of Christ and through the power of the Spirit. This statement does not mean to deny that individual Catholics may be real Christians, but it does mean that they cannot be real Christians if the theological explanation they give for their doctrinal assertions regarding salvation, the atonement, sacramental theology, divine election, and the like derive from the ecclesiastical Magisterium of the Catholic Church. In other words, they can’t be real Christians for Catholic reasons. They can only be real Christians if their explanations express the Evangelical theological tradition:

We affirm that individual Roman Catholics who for whatever reason do not self-consciously assent to the precise definitions of the Roman Catholic Magisterium regarding justification, the sole mediation of Christ, the relation between faith and the sacraments, the divine monergism of the new birth, and similar matters of evangelical conviction, but who think and speak evangelically about these things, are indeed our brothers and sisters in Christ, despite Rome’s official position. We perceive that the Roman Catholic Church contains many such believers. We deny, however, that in its present confession it is an acceptable Christian communion, let alone the mother of all the faithful to whom every believer needs to be related.

Professor Fesko is not one of the signers of this statement of resolutions, but it is important to know whether he agrees with its reasoning. If he does, how then can Catholics and Protestants like Fesko have ecumenical dialogue with the aim of unity in truth? His answer to this question will depend on whether he is, in the words of Reinhart Hütter, an “essential Protestant” or an “accidental Protestant.” “Essential Protestantism requires for its identity Catholicism as the ‘other.’” Hütter elaborates:

Much of essential Protestantism assumes that at the time of the Reformation the true Gospel—lost or at least significantly distorted shortly after the apostle Paul—was rediscovered and the Church in the true sense reconstituted. Virtually everything in-between, the few exceptions only affirming the rule, pertains to the aberration of Roman Catholicism. Essential Protestantism, there-
fore, in a large measure needs Roman Catholicism and especially the papacy to know itself, to have a hold of its identity as Protestantism.20

In contrast to essential Protestantism, there is accidental Protestantism. This sort of Protestantism “sees itself as the result of a particular, specific protestation”; in short, it “has seen itself to a large degree as a reform movement in the Church catholic.”21 “For accidental Protestants, there tends to be one fundamental difference—and it can be the Petrine office itself—that prevents them from being Catholic. This difference cannot be just any but must be one without which the truth of the Gospel is decisively distorted or even abandoned. Being Protestant in this vein amounts to an emergency position necessary for the sake of the Gospel's truth and the Church's faithfulness; in short, accidental Protestantism does not understand itself as ecclesial normalcy.”22 Now, essential Protestants are not only anti-papist but also anti-Catholic. An anti-Catholic is someone who not merely rejects the Catholic Church as a true visible expression of Christ’s body, as an acceptable Christian communion—as Resolution 6 does above—and as the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church, but also denies that Roman Catholics are fellow believers by virtue of sharing a love of Jesus Christ, accepting him as Lord and Savior, affirming the faith of the early ecumenical creeds, and sharing a familial bond in baptism and God’s Word. I want to put the following question to Fesko: What will it take for Fesko to recognize Catholics as ecumenical partners and to regard himself as being engaged “in a fresh constructive and critical evaluation both of the contemporary teaching and practice of the Roman Catholic Church and of the classical controverted issues”?

Hermeneutical Rules for Interpreting Council Documents

In 1985, on the twentieth anniversary of the close of the Second Vatican Council, John Paul II convened an extraordinary assembly of the Synod of Bishops. With the aim in mind of encouraging a deeper reception and implementation of the Council’s documents, the Synod set forth in the Final Report a proper hermeneutic of the Council, namely, a framework for properly interpreting them, in particular, six hermeneutical principles for sound interpretation.23 These principles should be adhered to by all would-be interpreters of Vatican II, not only Catholics, then, but also Evangelical commentators of the Council, such as Fesko, William Lane Craig, Clark Pinnock, Ronald Nash, and Harold A. Netland, among others, who purport to make claims about what the Council teaches.24 Pared down for my purpose here, these principles are as follows:

1. The theological interpretation of the conciliar doctrine must show attention to all the documents, in themselves and in their close inter-relationship, in such a way that the integral meaning of the Council’s affirmations—often very complex—might be understood and expressed.
2. The four constitutions of the council (those on liturgy, Church, revelation, and the Church in the modern world) are the hermeneutical key to the other documents—namely, the council’s nine decrees and three declarations.
3. The pastoral import of the documents ought not to be separated from, or set in opposition to, their doctrinal content.
4. No opposition may be made between the spirit and the letter of Vatican II.
5. The council must be interpreted in continuity with the great tradition of the church, including earlier councils. The Church is one and the same throughout all the councils.
6. Vatican II should be accepted as illuminating the problems of our own day.25

Missing from Professor Fesko’s brief remarks on Vatican II is the “ecumenical hospitality” exhibited by Machen and Kuyper.

In the next section, I will illustrate the particular importance of the first and fifth principles in my rebuttal of Professor Fesko’s interpretation of
LG 16. For now, it is important to understand that the first principle’s hermeneutical norm is twofold:26 one, in its intratextuality, meaning thereby interpreting the meaning of a conciliar text within the context of the whole document; and two, in its intertextuality, meaning thereby interpreting any specific document in the context of the whole body of documents of Vatican II. Furthermore, as the fifth principle states, intertextuality involves attending to the living tradition of the Church, including earlier councils, in the interpretation of the Council’s documents, an approach that Benedict XVI has called “the hermeneutics of continuity and renewal.”27

There is another fundamental hermeneutical rule to consider in the interpretation of conciliar documents. What is, then, this hermeneutical principle? Essentially it posits that we should not make judgments about, say, the Councils of Trent and Vatican I without understanding the integral totality of Catholicism because the statements of these councils were polemical and antithetical. In other words, all truth formulated for polemical reasons is partial—albeit true. Consider Hans Urs von Balthasar’s explication of this methodological principle: “Even though, of course, the truth of the Councils of Trent and Vatican I will never be overtaken or even relativized, nonetheless there are still other views and aspects of revelation than those expressed there. This has always happened throughout church history, when new statements are brought forth to complete earlier insights in order to do justice to the inexhaustible riches of divine revelation even in the earthen vessel of human language.”28 In other words, the truth of these doctrinal statements needs to be supplemented in order to present a more balanced or comprehensive view.29 Furthermore, Aidan Nichols has rightly noted that “We must not ask for perfection from Councils, even in their doctrinal aspect. It is enough to know that, read according to a hermeneutic of continuity, they will not lead us astray. An Ecumenical Council will never formally commit the Church to doctrinal error. It is, moreover, unfair to ask of Councils what they have not claimed to provide.”30 Against this background, I turn now to illustrate the bearing of these hermeneutical principles on the interpretation of LG 16.

Lumen Gentium 16
Anonymous Christians

Professor Fesko claims not merely that the idea of the “anonymous Christian,” the theologoumenon,31 as I shall call it, developed by Karl Rahner (1904-1984),32 is compatible with some part of LG 16 but that the Vatican Council promotes this idea.33 I now propose to show not only that the Council does not promote this theologoumenon but also that the central claims, if not all the assumptions of this theologoumenon, are incompatible with the teachings of LG and other Council documents. Since Fesko never actually says what the idea of the “anonymous Christian” is, I’ll begin by stating precisely and specifically what it means.

Despite the limitations of the typology of exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism, I will use it to state the Rahnerian idea of “anonymous Christians.” Regarding exclusivism, we must distinguish between ontological and epistemological exclusivism. Rahner is an ontological exclusivist because he holds that “God desires the salvation of everyone,” but also that “this salvation willed by God is the salvation won by Christ.”34 In short, in reply to the question of whether a man can be saved apart from the finished works of Christ, Rahner’s answer is a definitive “no.” Thus, Rahner is not a religious pluralist because he holds that not all religions are equally vehicles of salvation.35 But he is also not an epistemological exclusivist because he holds that a man might be saved apart from explicitly acknowledging and responding to Christ and his saving works. Now, the inclusivist is an ontological exclusivist but an epistemological inclusivist; he holds that there is no salvation apart from Christ but not necessarily through explicit faith in him. How might a man come to saving faith apart from explicitly acknowledging Christ? In particular, Rahner has in mind the question regarding the fate of the unevangelized; namely, what is the fate of those who through no fault of their own have never heard the Gospel of Jesus Christ? The idea of “anonymous Christians” purports to answer that question.

Pared down for my purpose here, this complex idea has the following elements:

1. (a) There is no salvation apart from Christ; (b) God desires the salvation of all men; and (c)
therefore—given (b), God’s universal salvific will—“every human being is really and truly exposed to the influence of divine, supernatural grace which offers an interior union with God and by means of which God communicates himself whether the individual takes up an attitude of acceptance or of refusal towards this grace.”36 This supernatural grace has its source in the saving work of Christ.37

. . . the truth of these doctrinal statements needs to be supplemented in order to present a more balanced or comprehensive view.

2. This divine grace, which Rahner calls a “supernatural existential,”38 is neither the common grace of creation nor some receptive capacity, a so-called potentia oboedientialis, for the supernatural, but is best thought of as a form of general prevenient grace: God’s free, unmerited, and forgiving self-communication “on the basis of God’s saving action in Christ,”39 since this “supernatural existential” does not itself bring about salvation because every individual has the possibility of accepting or rejecting this grace. As Ralph Martin rightly notes, “The individual’s response to this supernatural existential is critical.”40

3. The conditions under which the salvation of non-Christians—those especially who through no fault of their own have never heard the Gospel—may be possible, whether they know it or not, because (a) he “does not in any absolute or ultimate sense act against his own conscience,”41 (b) he “makes a moral decision in his life . . . [that] can also be thought to measure up to the character of a supernaturally elevated, believing and thus saving act, and hence to be more in actual fact than merely ‘natural morality’,”42 and (c) “he really accepts himself completely.”43 Briefly, by complete self-acceptance, Rahner means accepting that I am always already transcending myself and the finite world towards the infinite and absolute horizon that opens me to truth, goodness, and being. Rahner identifies this horizon with God. He claims that, in light of the Christian revelation, we may say that this openness, which everyone now lives within, whether he knows it or not, when informed by the gift of supernatural grace, directs the individual towards the absolute self-revelation of God in Christ.44 In this light, we can understand why Rahner says, “He who . . . accepts his existence . . . says . . . Yes to Christ even if he does not know it”45 (a) and (b) includes selfless acts of love, epistemic judgments of truth, and moral acts of goodness, the latter being acts of “daily fidelity, responsibility, virtue and loving service.”46 Implicit acts of (c) self-acceptance involve simply just being human—“whereby a person undertakes and lives the duty of each day in the quiet sincerity of patience, in devotion to his material duties and the demands made upon him by the persons under his care.”47 Rahner regards all these as implicit acts of faith, that is, implicit acts of acceptance of God’s supernatural existential grace, and hence those who make such acts not only accept themselves but also accept God’s self-communication in grace, whether they know it or not, and he refers to them as “anonymous Christians.”

4. Rahner assumes a virtually unlimited optimism regarding the probable (not just possible!) salvation of most non-Christians, yes, not apart from Christ and the offer of supernatural grace, but apart from explicit knowledge of Christ: “It is . . . impossible to think that this offer of supernatural, divinizing grace made to all men on account of the universal salvific purpose of God, should in general (prescinding from the relatively few exceptions) remain ineffective in most cases on account of the personal guilt of men.”48 Regarding, then, the response-rate to that offer, Rahner states that “we have no really conclusive reason for thinking pessimistically of men” and “every reason for thinking optimistically of God and his salvific will which is more powerful than the extremely limited stupidity and evil-mindedness of men.”49
Pared down for my purpose here, I now will state where the bishops of Vatican II, particularly with reference to LG 16, come down on these four points. Regarding point 1, the Council agrees with (a) and (b), but also with (c), if properly understood. To understand (c) properly, we need to read LG 16, first, in the context of LG 14, which reaffirms the historic Catholic teaching on the threefold necessity of faith, baptism, and the Church for salvation. We also need to read LG 16 in light of the preceding paragraph, LG 15, which affirms the genuine, albeit imperfect, communion of the Catholic Church with “separated brethren,” namely, non-Catholic Christians because there exist elements of grace and truth outside the visible boundaries of the Church. LG 16a follows this up with the question regarding not those who belong to the Church, either fully or imperfectly, but the profound mystery of how God in Christ may deal graciously with those who have not heard the Gospel, especially those committed non-Christians. As Berkouwer rightly puts it, “the Church can see signs of God’s grace and presence in this human life that is extra ecclesiam.” In particular, it is dealing with those who through no fault of their own (see LG 16b above) have failed to respond to the Gospel, and so what it says does not apply generally.

Furthermore, the Council refuses to answer the question of how the nonculpably ignorant might come to salvation without explicitly responding to Christ: “All this [(a) and (b)] holds true not only for Christians but also for all men of good will in whose hearts grace is active invisibly. For since Christ died for all, and since all men are in fact called to one and the same destiny, which is divine, we must hold that the Holy Spirit offers to all the possibility of being made partners, in a way known to God alone, in the paschal mystery.” Rahman acknowledges that “Vatican II is certainly extremely reserved,” and I would add agnostic, with regard to the answer to this question, but that boundary does not stop him from developing the idea of “anonymous Christians.” What LG 16b does say is that “whatever goodness or truth” is found in these non-Christian religions “is looked upon by the Church as a preparation for the gospel [praeparatio evangelica].” The Council adds, “She regards such qualities as given by him who enlightens all men so that they may finally [tandum] have life.” The Church, then, looks upon whatever truth and goodness is found as a preparation for the gospel, meaning thereby that it prepares men to receive the Gospel of Jesus Christ, in whom completion is found: “She proclaims and is in duty bound to proclaim without fail, Christ who is the way, the truth, and the life (John 14:6). In him, in whom God reconciled all things to himself (2 Cor 5:18-19), men find the fullness of their religious life [plenitudo vitae religioae].” It is clear from these statements that the Church does not assert that a man finds life in these religions; life is to be found solely in Christ and his Church. In other words, Vatican II does not recognize non-Christian religions to be means of God’s saving grace in Christ. Again to quote from LG, but this time from paragraph 17,

The Church is driven by the Holy Spirit to do her part for the full realization of the plan of God, who has constituted Christ as the source of salvation for the whole world. By her proclamation of the Gospel, she draws her hearers to perceive and profess the faith, she prepares them for baptism, snatches them from the slavery of error, and she incorporates them into Christ so that in love for him they grow to full maturity. The effect of her work is that whatever good is found sown in the minds and hearts of men or in the rites and customs of peoples, these not only are preserved from destruction, but are purified, raised up, and perfected for the glory of God, the confusion of the devil, and the happiness of man.

Which elements of truths and goodness, how many, distinguishing them from error, both metaphysical and moral, and how the former are precisely used by the prevenient grace of God preparing men to respond to the gospel is an open question, an a posteriori question, depending on the religion in question.

Regarding point 2, Ralph Martin correctly expresses the biblical teaching that “God offers sufficient grace for salvation to every human being, and that where sin abounds, grace abounds even more [Rom 5:20].” So, even though LG does not use the terms “supernatural existential,” it does refer to the reality signified by those terms, namely, the prevenient grace of God’s universal salvific will.

The major points of divergence between LG 16...
and Rahner’s idea of the “anonymous Christian” are found in points 3 and 4. Let me first deal with point 4 before point 3. Point 4 concerns the optimism of salvation supported by Rahner regarding those who have not heard the Gospel. I think we can definitively say that the only way that we can infer such optimism from LG 16 is if we fail to read 16a and 16b in the context of 16c, excluding from consideration as well “its foundational references to the scriptural and doctrinal foundations of its teachings.”

Let me briefly explain.

I distinguished above between epistemological exclusivism and inclusivism. Many interpreters of Vatican II simply assume that the Council adopts a broad epistemological inclusivism, drawing the automatic conclusion from this, given its alleged optimism, that more people are actually saved without hearing the Gospel than lost because most people actually respond to the prevenient grace of God’s universal salvific will. Karl Rahner is chief among those interpreters. But this optimistic reading of LG 16 is unsustainable when we consider that 16c states, in light of scriptural testimony, that the “response rate” of the unevangelized is such that “very often” [at saepius] they are deceived by the Evil One, becoming then, “futile in their thinking, their foolish hearts being darkened, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator” (Rom 1:21, 25). Considered in this light, the optimistic reading is stopped dead in its track: LG 16 does not imply, let alone promote, the idea that more people are actually saved without hearing the Gospel than lost. Consequently, at best we can say that LG 16 is compatible with a narrow epistemological inclusivism, supporting some form of accessibilism, that is, the possibility of people being saved under very specific conditions, such as, being nonculpable for their ignorance of the Gospel. Better yet, I would prefer to say that LG 16 best fits an opaque exclusivism because the realization of the possibility of salvation for the nonculpably ignorant is left to God. That is where the matter is left: “For since Christ died for all, and since all men are in fact called to one and the same destiny, which is divine, we must hold that the Holy Spirit offers to all the possibility of being made partners, in a way known to God alone, in the paschal mystery.”

This calling is about the offer of grace, not its efficacy and finality. Thus, “God calls men to be participants in his grace; by what means and with what effect is not here stated.”

Finally, as far as the idea of the “anonymous Christian” is concerned, there remains to say something briefly about point 3 above, namely, about implicit and explicit Christianity. Suppose salvation, by God’s grace, is possible for the individual that is extra ecclesiam and who, without explicitly responding to the Gospel, is nonculpable for his ignorance of it. Does LG 16 teach that, say, his living in conformity with what he knows of God’s will, of following the light of his conscience, and of completely accepting his humanity in the fundamental act of self-transcendence implies that as such he is making implicit acts of faith in Christ in ignorance, implicitly accepting God’s redeeming grace and, therefore, is saved? I see no evidence to support the claim that in LG 16, or elsewhere in the Council’s documents, a good Buddhist or Hindu or Moslem or even, for that matter, a good Jew is an implicit Christian. If the possibility of salvation is realized for the nonculpably unevangelized, they are saved objectively on the basis of Christ’s atoning work, but they are saved subjectively because God’s prevenient grace elicits a faith response to the light and understanding they do have of God’s general revelation in nature and conscience.

I see no evidence to support the claim that in LG 16 . . . a good Buddhist or Hindu or Moslem or even . . . a good Jew is an implicit Christian.

Furthermore, given Rahner’s and others’ optimism of salvation, “If, people can be saved without hearing the Gospel, and if except for a few, rare exceptions [as Rahner alleges] we can presume that almost everybody is saved, why bother to
preach it?"64 In contrast to this *reductio ad absurdum*, which implies that making a concrete confession and explicit witness of Christian faith (see Rom 10: 9-10, 14-15) is not necessary for being saved, *LG* 16c urges the Church to not only heed the “Lord’s command, ‘preach the Gospel to every creature’ (Mk 16:16),” but also to make “the words of the apostle [Paul] her own, ‘Woe to me if I do not preach the Gospel’ (1 Cor 9:16).” Hence, we see the import of these words in Vatican II’s Decree on the Church’s Missionary Activity, *Ad Gentes*:

Christ is the Truth and the Way which the preaching of the Gospel lays open to all men when it speaks those words of Christ in their ear: “Repent, and believe the Gospel” (Mark 1:13). Since he who does not believe is already judged (cf. John 3:18), the words of Christ are at once words of judgment and grace, of life and death. For it is only by putting to death that which is old that we can come to newness of life.65

**Pelagianism**

I now need to make a few comments regarding Professor Fesko’s charge that *LG* 16 espouses salvation by good works and hence Pelagianism. This charge arises from several references in the Council documents to the concrete deeds of “men of good will,” those striving to live a “good life” (*GS* 22) and “trying in their actions to do his will as they know it through the dictates of their conscience” (*LG* 16b). Rahner correctly remarks that *LG* 16 “is in no way implying that here in these cases salvation is achieved as it were in a substitute fashion by means of a purely natural morality. This would indeed contradict Scripture and magisterium. It is also excluded by the words of the Constitution [*LG*] itself: salvation is reached ‘non sine divina gratia’, ‘sub influen gratiae’.”66 Still, since there is a connection here between morality and salvation, it is important to ask what conception of grace is involved here since Fesko’s charge completely overlooks that, as Berkouwer also rightly notes, “morality is spoken of as under the influence of grace.”67

Professor Fesko’s charge misses, then, that in those references to morality we find phrases such as “in whose hearts grace is active invisibly” and “moved by grace” as well as “not without grace.” The reality of grace to which these phrases refer is connected to the saving work of Christ. Furthermore, charges like Fesko’s also overlook, as Gilbert Meilaender rightly notes, “that, however it may be that the Spirit of Christ manages to accomplish this in some ‘men of good will,’ what the Spirit does is bring them into communion with Jesus.”68 One final thing that Professor Fesko also misses, but which is present explicitly in *LG* 15 (note: the need to read contextually!), is that, as Meilaender puts it, “Christians themselves should know that (in St. Paul’s words) they have nothing to boast of before God. They have no claim on God and no ability of their own to please him.”69

Indeed, in the words of the bishops of the Council, “All the children of the Church should nevertheless remember that their exalted condition results, not from their own merits, but from the grace of Christ. If they fail to respond in thought, word, and deed to that grace, not only shall they not be saved, but they shall be the more severely judged.”

Perhaps the phrases “good will” and “good life” as well as the reference to acts of conscience distracted Fesko into thinking that they lay the foundation for saving faith in good works. Still, there is no justifiable reason to draw his conclusion that the Church affirms Pelagianism, given the undeniable fact that the reality of grace to which these phrases refer is inherently connected to the saving work of Christ. Further, although *LG* 16 is quite adequately non-Pelagian in the language it uses, my point is reinforced when one takes into account *Gaudium et Spes* 22. In this latter passage, not only is grace invisibly at work in the hearts of men, but also salvation, rather than being a matter of good will, is decisively a work of the “Holy Spirit,” which “in a manner known only to God offers to every man the possibility of being associated with the paschal mystery.” In other words, whenever salvation does occur for the nonculpably unevangelized, it is determined by the redeeming grace of Christ; objectively accomplished in the mystery of his passion, death on the cross, and resurrection; and brought to bear on him by the sanctifying grace of the Holy Spirit.

**The God of Islam and of the Bible**

Do Christians and Moslems worship the same God? Professor Fesko lays one final charge at the
door of the Catholic Church; namely, he alleges that
\( LG 16a \) responds in a wholly affirmative manner
to this question. His rejoinder to the Church is that
faith in the God of Islam and faith in the God of
the Bible “hold nothing in common.” Now, I
respectfully submit that Fesko’s allegation that the
Church gives a simple “yes” to this opening question
is false. As Timothy George wisely notes, “There
are some questions that do not allow for a simple
yes or no answer, and this is one of them.” Briefly,
I want to show why the answer to the question
whether Christians and Moslems worship the same
God is both yes and no. As Kenneth Cragg once
clearly put the point I want to argue, and which I
think rightly captures the position of the bishops
of the Council, “The answer to the vexed question,
‘Is the God of Islam and the God of the Gospel
the same?’ can only rightly be ‘Yes! and No!’ Yes,
as the common ground of all we say in partial
unison: No, insofar as our convictions diverge. It
would be foolish to make either the convergence
or the divergence total, to identify altogether or to
contrast only.”

First, let us be clear about what Vatican II does
not say about Islam. The bishops of the Council do
not affirm that special revelation is found in Islam,
either in the Qur’\( \text{\text{\text{\text{\text{\text{\text{a}}}}}} \) or in Muhammad, as it is in
Judaism and Christianity. Significantly, then, neither
this religious text nor Muhammad as a prophet is
recognized by the Council in \( LG 16a \) or in \( NA 3 \). We
can easily understand why. Vatican II’s \( Dei Verbum, \)
the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation,
teaches that special revelation is exclusive to the
Old and New Testaments. Further, contrary to
the claim of Islam that Muhammad is Allah’s final
Messenger, the prophet of Islam, who allegedly
came to complete and correct the Old and New
Testaments, bringing the revelation of Christ to
fulfillment, the Catholic Church teaches that Jesus
Christ “is himself both the mediator and fullness
of Revelation.”

Second, what, then, does Vatican II say about
Islam as far as correspondences are concerned
between the latter and Christianity? In answering
this question, we need to be mindful of the point
that Jesuit priest and theologian Samir Khali Samir
makes, namely, “that even behind identical or
similar expression, there can be totally different
meanings that are important to learn in order to
deepen one’s knowledge of the truth, not for any
desire to emphasize the distinctions.” A more
precise way to put the point that Fr. Samir is making
here is to answer the question whether Muslims and
Christians have the same God by distinguishing,
along with Kenneth Cragg, between theological
subject and theological predicate. In other words,
do they speak of the same theological subject when
they predicate of God? Yes, they do in one sense,
since Muslims and Christians are monotheists who
predicate of God that he is “the one God, living and
subsisting in Himself; merciful and all-power, the
Creator of heaven and earth.” In this sense, then,
Christians and Moslems believe in the same God,
the one God, of monotheism and the theology of
creation this entails.

Still, they may not only differ in understanding
what it is they predicate of him but also diverge
fundamentally in the predicates ascribed to him.
For instance, both Muslims and Christians predicate
of God that he is one, yet they profoundly differ
in their understanding of that predicate. The
Christian dogma of the Trinity rejects as false the
Unitarianism of Islam. That dogma affirms that
“God is one but not solitary,” for he himself
exists in the communion of “three divine persons
eternally united in being, relationship, and love.”

As John Paul II rightly explains,

We know that in the light of the full Revelation in
Christ, this mysterious oneness cannot be reduced
to a numerical unity. The Christian mystery leads
us to contemplate in God’s substantial unity the
persons of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spir-
it: each possesses the divine substance whole and
indivisible, but each is distinct from the other by
virtue of their reciprocal relations. Their relations
in no way compromise the oneness of God, as the
Fourth Lateran Council explains (1215): “Each of the persons is that supreme reality, viz., the divine substance, essence or nature. . . . It does not generate, is not begotten and does not proceed” [De Fide catholica, chapter 2]. The Christian doctrine on the Trinity, confirmed by the Councils, explicitly rejects any form of “tritheism” or “polytheism.” In this sense, i.e., with reference to the one divine substance, there is significant correspondence between Christianity and Islam. However, this correspondence must not let us forget the difference between the two religions. We know that the unity of God is expressed in the mystery of the three divine Persons. Indeed, since he is Love (cf. 1 Jn 4:8), God has always been a Father who gives his whole self in begetting the Son, and both are united in a communion of love which is the Holy Spirit. This distinction and compenetration [mutual indwelling] (perichoresis) of the three divine Persons is not something added to their unity but is its most profound and characteristic expression.

This last point regarding the truth of the Trinity means that Muslims and Christians also profoundly differ not only in their understanding of common predicates, such as the oneness of God, but also in the very predicates they make of him. Trinitarian dogma involves predicating some essentially and irreducibly true statements about God, and the source of this fundamental difference concerns the incompatible responses given by Muslims and Christians to the question concerning who Jesus Christ really is. The answer to that question is inherently and necessarily tied to the central tenets of the Christian faith, namely, the truths of the Incarnation, life, passion, death on the cross, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ, who is wholly and truly man and wholly and truly God. Therefore, as Cragg rightly emphasizes, “God in the Qur’an is not ‘the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ’. That is not a predication of Islamic doctrine. Carrying back that significance into the ‘subject’, Allah means a ‘difference’ in how God is understood.” And the difference is such that although Christians and Muslims adore the one, true God (LG 16a, NA 3), having the same God as their referent, it is only those who know Jesus who then would also know the Father (John 14:6-9; 1 John), and hence we cannot legitimately claim that the Muslim knows the God that he worships (1 John 4:2-3; 2 John 1:7-9). This is especially evident when “knowing” is understood “in its full breadth,” a knowing that “can rightly be called ‘communion’” (1 John 1:3), since it is a share in the same life (John 14:19f), a union perfect in the truth of love (John 17:26; cf. 1 John 2:2f; 3:16).

Cragg’s last point brings us back to Fr. Samir’s thesis that even identical referents may have different meanings. This is in fact the case with respect to the reference to Abraham in LG 16a. It also brings us back to Professor Fesko’s charge that the Catholic Church holds that the faith of Abraham is the faith of Muslims. LG 16a states that Muslims “profess to hold the faith of Abraham,” and NA 3 states that the “Islamic faith is pleased to associate itself” with Abraham. Yes, Muslims follow the example of Abraham in submitting to God, states NA 3, but neither the latter nor LG 16a holds that a real salvific relationship, let alone a covenantal one, exists between Muslims and Abraham, as if Abraham is a common source of faith in the history of salvation between Christians and Muslims. By contrast, states NA 4, there exists a “spiritual bond linking the people of the New Covenant with Abraham’s stock.” In other words, the Church of Christ acknowledges that in God’s plan of salvation the beginning of her faith and election is to be found in the patriarchs, Moses, and the prophets. She professes that all Christ’s faithful, who as men of faith are sons of Abraham (cf. Gal 3:7), are included in the same patriarch’s call and that the salvation of the Church is mystically prefigured in the exodus of God’s chosen people from the land of bondage.

That the bishops of the Council did not affirm a spiritual patrimony common to Christians and Muslims is even clearer when we consider the first draft of LG 16a: “The sons of Ishmael who, professing Abraham as a father, also believe in the God of Abraham.” One might have some grounds for Fesko’s charge on the basis of this draft but not on the final version. The latter states only that Muslims profess “to hold the faith of
Abraham.” This statement does not imply that there exists a salvation-historical continuity or covenantal relation between Muslims and Abraham. Rightly so, since in reply to the question “Who are the sons of Abraham?” the answer must be (in the words of St. Paul) “the men of faith” (Gal 3:7; see also, 3:9), namely “those who are justified by faith in Christ and whose life is guided by the principle of faith.” Rightly so, since in reply to the question “Who are the sons of Abraham?” the answer must be (in the words of St. Paul) “the men of faith” (Gal 3:7; see also, 3:9), namely “those who are justified by faith in Christ and whose life is guided by the principle of faith.”

Therefore, Islam fails to pass the “Galatian test of what it means to be Abrahamic”:

Abraham is not . . . one source of three faiths [Judaism, Christianity, and Islam]. Christ was his “singular issue” (Gal 3:16), Christ and only Christ. What counted with Abraham in God’s saving plan was “his faith in God” (3:5), for which he was blessed (3:13). In the fullness of time that blessing was Christ Jesus, nothing else. Abraham in God’s saving plan is not a “source” of anything else. Such an assertion is not “the gospel of Christ” but another gospel (1:6f). Making references to Abraham in a religious document like the Koran and citing him as an example of a prophet and believer in the oneness of God is not Abrahamic therefore in the Christian understanding of “Abrahamic.” Judaism led to Christ, therefore it was Abrahamic. Islam does not.

In conclusion, in rebutting Professor Fesko’s charges that LG 16 affirms the theologoumenon of the “anonymous Christian,” the heresy of Pelagianism, and that the God of Islam and of Christianity is wholly identical, I trust that I have provided some context for further ecumenical conversation between us. In the words of the epigraph to this article, “Authentic ecumenism is a gift at the service of truth.” I hope that as fellow Christians we shall avail ourselves of the Lord’s gift.

Endnotes
6. I have done some of that work, especially with respect to the tradition of Dutch neo-Calvinism, in my book, Dialogue of Love: Confessions of an Evangelical Catholic Ecumenist (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2010). I continue this assessment, but now focused exclusively on G.C. Berkouwer’s writings on Catholicism, in my study, Berkouwer and Catholicism, Disputed Questions (forthcoming).
11. Vatican II, Nostra Aetate, nos. 4, 5.
12. There are similar passages in Vatican II’s Gaudium et Spes, the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, no. 22, Ad Gentes, Decree on the Mission Activity of the Church, no. 9, and Nostra Aetate, nos. 2-4.
13. I leave largely out of account in this article the writings of John Paul II: for example, his 1990 Encyclical Letter, Redemptoris Missio; Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI, Truth and Tolerance: Christian Belief and World Religions (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004), and the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, August 2000, Dominus Iesus, On the Unicity and Salvific Universality of Jesus Christ and the Church.
15. Ut Unum Sint, no. 29.
16. For a brief history of Reformed-Roman Catholic ecumenical dialogue as well as a common confession on two areas of fundamental agreement, namely, “that our Lord Jesus Christ is the only mediator between God and [man] and that we receive justification by grace through faith,” see “Towards a Common Understanding of the Church” in Deepening Communion, International Ecumenical Documents with Roman Catholic Participation, Edited by William G. Rusch and Jeffrey Gros, F.S.C. (Washington, D.C.: United States Catholic Conference, 1998), 179-229, and for the
quotes in this paragraph, 187.


18. Ibid., Resolution 6.


20. Ibid.

21. Ibid., 678.

22. Ibid., 676-677.


29. Aidan Nichols, O.P. and Moyra Doorly, The Council in Question, A Dialogue with Catholic Traditionalism (Herefordshire: Gracewing, 2011), 81-83. Nichols clearly distinguishes “criticizing incomplete or unbalanced formulations in the language of the Conciliar texts . . . from the claim that the Council fathers formally committed the Church to doctrinal error” (29-30). The former is within the limits of acceptable criticism, not making one a dissenter; the latter is not.

30. Ibid., italics added.

31. Karl Rahner and Herbert Vorgrimler define “theologoumenon” as follows: “This term may be used to designate a theological doctrine that is not directly taught by the Church’s magisterium and thus does not authoritatively demand our assent, but is of such a nature that it sheds light on the connexion among many other explicit doctrines of the Church and for this reason is commendable” (Theological Dictionary, Edited by Cornelius Ernst, O.P., Translated by Richard Strachen [New York: Herder and Herder, 1965], 455-456).


33. Netland also claims (wrongly, I will argue) that the “possibility” of an “anonymous” or “implicit” Christian . . . was explicitly acknowledged at Vatican II” (Encountering Religious Pluralism, 43). A more careful reader of Vatican II than Netland, Pinnock denies that Vatican II’s bishops held “that Buddhism, for example, has intrinsic value as a way to salvation, or that being a good Buddhist would make you an anonymous Christian. They did not say that Jesus is hidden in the religious history of humanity. These are the ideas of theologians like Rahner and others subsequent to the Council, and they represent large steps beyond it that we should not be taking” (A Wideness in God’s Mercy, 109).


35. It would take me too far afield to discuss Rahner’s view on the “lawful”—that is, God-given—character of non-Christian religions in God’s plan of salvation for preparing individuals for his grace. Rahner doesn’t hold that these religions are “on a par with the
Christian faith as regards its importance for salvation” (“Jesus Christ in the Non-Christian Religions,” 41), or deny that these religions harbor “what is false, erroneous, wrongly developed and depraved” ideas, but only affirms that despite all this they have positive significance (“Christianity and the Non-Christian Religions,” 121-131).


37. Foundations, 156-158.


40. Martin, Lumen Gentium 16, 137.


42. “Christianity and the Non-Christian Religions,” 125.


45. Foundations, 228. Rahner adds, “Now God and the grace of Christ are present as the secret essence of every reality we can choose. . . . Anyone who accepts his humanity fully, and all the more so of course the humanity of others, has accepted the Son of Man because in him God has accepted man” (ibid.).

46. Martin, Lumen Gentium 16, 141.


49. I am applying here principle 1, namely that we should read the paragraphs of the Council in context.

50. It would take us too far afield here to deal with Rahner’s writings on the question of salvation and the un-, ill-, or misinformed atheist about Christ’s person and work.

51. Berkouwer, De Kerk I, 196. ET: The Church, 159. In the Dogmatic Constitution, Unigenitus, issued by Clement XI in 1713, he condemned the proposition “Outside of the Church, no grace is granted” (no. 29).


53. Vatican II, Gaudium et Spes, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, no. 22, italics added. I’ll come back to treat the meaning of “men of good will” when I discuss Pelagianism in the text.

54. “Jesus Christ in the Non-Christian Religions,” 40.

55. Because of God’s common grace, neo-Calvinists like Kuyper (Encyclopaedia der Heilige Godgeleerdheid, II, 254-255; see also 227, 231. ET: Principles of Sacred Theology, 301-302; see also 275, 279) and Herman Bavinck, (Gereformeerde Dogmatiek, I, 290-291 [ET: Reformed Dogmatiek, I, 318-319]), also find truth and goodness in pagan religions.

56. Vatican II, Nostra Aetate, no. 2, and also no. 4.

57. Martin, Lumen Gentium 16, 147.

58. Martin clearly, persuasively, and definitively makes this very point in Lumen Gentium 16, 151-157.


60. I owe this term to Craig, “Politically Incorrect Salvation,” 84: “Accessibilists maintain that persons who never hear the gospel can avail themselves of salvation through their response to God’s general revelation alone.”

61. It would take me too far afield to consider other very specific conditions the bishops of the Council describe as necessary for the possibility of salvation for non-Christians un-, ill-, or misinformed about Christ’s person and work. Ralph Martin nicely summarizes these conditions: “1. That non-Christians be not culpable for their ignorance of the Gospel. 2. That non-Christians seek God with a sincere heart [see Hebrews 11:6]. 3. That non-Christians try to live their life in conformity with what they know of God’s will. This is commonly spoken of as following the natural law or the light of conscience. It is important to note, as the Council does, in order to avoid a Pelagian interpretation, that this is possible only because people are ‘moved by grace’ [LG 16b; GS 22]. 4. The non-Christians welcome or receive whatever ‘good or truth’ they live amidst—rejecting possibly to elements of their non-Christian religions or cultures which may refract to some degree that light that enlightens every man (John 1:9). These positive elements are intended to be ‘preparation for the Gospel’” (Lumen Gentium 16, 15). One might add here that those who never hear the Gospel through no fault of their own will be judged by the light and understanding they do have of God’s general revelation in nature and conscience.

62. Gaudium et Spes, no. 22. See also, Vatican II, Ad Gentes, no. 7. I owe the term “opaque exclusivism” to Paul Helm, “Are They Few That Be Saved?” in Universalism and the Doctrine of Hell, edited by Nigel M. des Cameron

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69. Ibid., no. 2, but also no. 17. We find a similar truth expressed in Dei Verbum, no. 11.

70. Elsewhere in Nostra Aetate we read, “The Church has also a high regard for the Muslims. They worship God, who is one, living and subsistent, merciful and almighty, the Creator of heaven and earth, who has also spoken to men. They strive to submit themselves without reserve to the hidden decrees of God, just as Abraham submitted himself to God's plan, to whose faith Muslims eagerly link their own. Although not acknowledging him as God, they venerate Jesus as a prophet, his virgin Mother they also honor, and even at times devoutly invoke. Further, they await the day of judgment and the reward of God following the resurrection of the dead. For this reason they highly esteem an upright life and worship God, especially by way of prayer, alms-deeds and fasting” (no. 3). See also, Gavin D'Costa, “Traditions and Reception: Interpreting Vatican II's 'Declaration on the Church's Relation to Non-Christian Religions’,” New Blackfriars 92:1040 (2011): 484-503.

71. Fesko, “Machen and the Gospel,” 26, “The faith of Abraham is not the faith of Islam and . . . Yahweh, the one true living God, is not Allah.”

72. Timothy George, Is the Father of Jesus the God of Muhammad? (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 129.


74. Dei Verbum, no. 11.

75. Ibid., no. 2, but also no. 17. We find a similar truth expressed in Gaudium et Spes, no. 22, and in Lumen Gentium, nos. 2-3.


77. Cragg, Muhammad & the Christian, 124. See also, George, Is the Father of Jesus the God of Muhammad?, 75.

78. Nostra Aetate, 3.

79. Cragg, Muhammad & the Christian, 124, “So, likewise, with other dimensions of faith and with other ‘adjectives’, like merciful, gracious, holy, loving, which faith ascribes to God. These also have subtle distinctions within their common vocabulary currency.”

80. Catechism of the Catholic Church, no. 254.

81. George, Is the Father of Jesus the God of Muhammad? 82: “In the biblical view, relationship is constitutive for God himself: The Father gives, the Son obediently receives, and the Holy Spirit proceeds from both of them.”

82. John Paul II, “General Audience of Wednesday, May 5, 1999, nos. 2-3, www.ewtn.com/library/papaldoc/jp2muslm.htm. The late pope succinctly and critically charges the Qur'an with a reductionist revelation of God: “Whoever knows the Old and New Testaments, and then reads the Quran, clearly sees the process by which it completely reduces Divine Revelation. It is impossible not to note the movement away from what God said about Himself. First in the Old Testament through the prophets, and then finally in the New Testament through His Son. In Islam all the richness of God's self-revelation, which constitutes the heritage of the Old and New Testaments, has definitely been set aside. Some of the most beautiful names in the human language are given to the God of the Quran, but He is ultimately a God outside of the world, a God who is only Majesty, never Emmanuel, God-with-us. Islam is not a religion of redemption. There is no room for the Cross and the Resurrection. Jesus is mentioned, but only as a prophet who prepares for the last prophet, Muhammad. There is also mention of Mary, His Virgin Mother, but the tragedy of redemption is completely absent. For this reason not only the theology but also the anthropology of Islam is very distant from Christianity” (Crossing the Threshold of Hope [New York: Knopf, 1994], 92-93, italics added). Pace Miroslav Volf, given the quotation in the text and in this note, one cannot say without significant qualification that “John Paul II unambiguously affirms that Muslims and Christians worship the same God” (Allah: A Christian Response [New York: HarperOne, 2011], 80).

83. Pace Miroslav Wolf, the Qur'an does not merely reject misconceptions and hence heterodox Christians' doctrines of the Trinity, but the doctrine of the Trinity itself because it denies the divinity of Jesus Christ (Allah: A Christian Response, 14, 124, 127-148). Despite my objection, Volf does give an excellent defense of the dogma of the Trinity against Moslem objections (Ibid., 136-139).

84. Cragg, Muhammad & the Christian, 124.

Therefore, the Church does not speak of the “three Abrahamic faiths” (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) as some contemporary theologians, such as Miroslav Volf, are inclined to do (Allah: A Christian Response, 140).

87. Nostra Aetate, no. 4.

88. Samir, 111 Questions on Islam and the West, cites the first draft of this text, 207. I am indebted to him for clarifying the fundamental difference between the first draft and the final version of LG 16a.


91. I am grateful to Robert Fastiggi, Fr. Thomas Guarino, Ralph Martin, and Fr. John McDermott, SJ, for their comments on a first draft of this article.