

Vatican II and Interreligious Dialogue

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The Second Vatican Council was clearly a revolution in that it fundamentally and irreversibly altered the historical development of a massive social and cultural institution in a way that no one could have planned, foreseen or predicted before it began.¹

These words really bring out the astonishing wave of divine grace that broke during the Second Vatican Council thanks to which the 'revolution' took place. This revolution involved many changes both within the Church and without. While the internal changes of the Church are manifold: conceptual,² structural,³ functional,⁴ liturgical⁵ and cultural⁶, (b) the relational changes *ad extra* were fourfold: (a) restoring unity of Churches, accepting the Modern World with all its problems as well as its achievements, (c) defending religious freedom of people, and (d) recognizing the value of other religions. Of these relational changes the last three were not at all in the planning stage of the Council. Nor was there any preparatory draft ready made before the Council began. They all were stirred during the Council and brought out by the Council. This itself is a clear indication that the Second Vatican Council was clearly a revolution, inspired and steered by the Holy Spirit.

The churning of the Spirit during the Council was most perceptible in the formation of *Declaration of the Relation of the Church to Non-*

Christian Religions, Nostra Aetate. Originally there was just a desire on the part of the 'good pope' to incorporate a note on the Jewish-Christian relation as part of the Decree on Ecumenism. But when the note was presented in the Council this section underwent so many modifications that it had to be shifted from one document to another till it was found fitting to have a separate document by itself so as to include statements on the diversity of religions. The whole story of its making is itself a clear evidence of the working of the Spirit in the Council. Rightly does Cardinal Cassidy observe: "During the council, a remarkable change had taken place in the Catholic teaching on the Jewish people, and new era had opened for relations with other world religions. For many of the bishops present in the Council, this declaration was the fruit of a new understanding and wider horizons."⁷

Therefore, while considering the topic of this article, it is necessary to make a detailed study of this Declaration which is precisely attempted in Part 2 of this article. But the merit of Vat. II does not lie just in the release of a separate document on interreligious dialogue. The overall concern of the Council was so dialogical that there are numerous references interspersed in various other documents of the council. Hence Part 3 tries to glean those bits, and present them together, interwoven into a thematic synthesis so as to explicate their bearing on Interreligious Dialogue. Both these Parts will really be meaningful if we bear in mind the dialogical context in which the Council was convoked and the story of development of the document in particular. So the Part 1 of this article tries to just set the background.

PART 1. THE CONTEXT AND THE CALL OF VAT. II

Undoubtedly the election of Pope John XXIII was solely action of the Holy Spirit. Angelo Giuseppe Cardinal Roncalli's name did not even figure in the first balloting. It was only in the 11th balloting on the 4th day that Cardinal

Roncalli was elected. It was indeed a surprise to all. Most particularly it was a surprise to Roncalli himself who had arrived in Rome with a return train ticket to Venice and hoped for a short conclave. Actually the choice was seen by many a “pope of transition”. The Pope himself attested to it: “We do not have the right to see a long way ahead of us.” However, to great excitement of all, it was this “stopgap” pope who was the cause of the turning point in Church’s history, as he called for an ecumenical council, which initiated a new age for the Church in general and interreligious relations, in particular.

People wondered:” Where was the need of the ecumenical Council?” There was not any controversy raging in the Church on any doctrinal point. Nor was there any aberration in the practice of faith in the Church. There was no emergency-situation in the Church, calling for the worldwide response of the bishops across the universal Church. Yet, the Pope was just convinced that the Church, being” a pilgrim people”, was in need of conversion and reform. To put it in his pet phrase *aggiornamento* (updating) was the need of the times. More than this, he did not have a clear idea of all what he wanted the council to do. He himself agreed that his announcement of the Council was “completely unexpected, like a flash of heavenly light, shedding sweetness in the eyes and ears.”⁸ In trying to explain to a group of bishops what *aggiornamento* meant, the Pope just went to the nearest window, opened it, and said: “The Church needs to let in some fresh air.” In his opening speech of the Council Pope John XXIII indicted that the agenda of the Council was to be focused on bringing about a renewal in dialogue with the modern world.

In the present order of things, Divine Providence is leading us to a new order of human relations which, by men’s own efforts and even beyond their very expectations, are directed toward the fulfilment of God’s superior and inscrutable designs. And everything, even human differences, leads to the greater good of the Church.⁹

The greatness of John XXIII was that “he was open to the call of the Spirit — both in the tradition of the Church and in the signs of the times.”¹⁰ This attitude of openness of the Conciliar Pope was significantly evidenced in the making of the document of the *Declaration of the Church's Relation to Other religions, Nostra Aetate*). Originally, among the preparatory documents there was not even a draft proposal for Church's Relation to other religions. Pope John XXIII had simply wanted the Council to make a statement on the Jews, condemning the evils of anti-Semitism and challenging the past assumptions Catholics have made about Judaism.¹¹ The reason is simple: the Jews had been dispersed, persecuted, massacred and suffered Hitler's genocide. That they still were persevering was itself a problem for the conscience of humanity. As a ‘good pope’ John XXIII wanted that the Church must be concerned about it. He commissioned the secretariat on Christian Unity, headed by Augustine Cardinal Bea, to prepare a note on the Jews, as part of the Decree on Ecumenism. The commission made a lot of study and survey and prepared a scheme to be included as chapter 4 of the Draft document on Ecumenism. When it was placed before the Council, on November 19, 1963 this section was titled as “On the Relation of Catholics to Non-Christians Especially to Jews.”¹² To justify the inclusion of the Jewish section in the Decree on Ecumenism, the draft started with these opening words:

After having presented the principles of Catholic ecumenism, we cannot pass over in silence the fact that these same principles should be applied – taking into account the different situation – to the non-Christians who give worship to God... This above all applies to the Jews who have special bonds with the Church of Christ.¹³

However some fathers of the Council opposed the idea of treating relationship with Jews in the decree on Ecumenism. But a more severe opposition came from bishops from Arab countries. They expressed fears

that a positive statement on the Jews would be interpreted as if the Church is for an endorsement of the emerging Zionist movement for erection of a new state of Israel and that it was taking sides in the political dispute between the Israelis and the Palestinians.¹⁴ So, the draft was returned to the commission with a demand that anti-Semitic rhetoric should be avoided and that it should treat not just Jews but Muslims as well.

Accordingly the Bea Commission prepared a new draft during the time between the second and third sessions of the council (Dec.1963-Sep.1964). It was titled as *Second Declaration: On the Jews and Non-Christians*, and was published in various newspapers. But comments from the press were so critical that an entirely new text was presented in the third Session on 20 November, 1964. This third draft had elaborated the sections on non-Christian religions, mentioning the positive religious values of Buddhism and Hinduism, and giving special attention to Muslims.¹⁵ Accordingly the title also was changed: *Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions*. It evoked a great interest. Bishops from Asia argued that the many religions of the world do believe in a supreme and transcendent creator. They venerate God through sincere acts of piety which leads them to live a moral life. Catholic Church should give due respect to truth, goodness and humanity found in them. Many Council Fathers insisted that the spiritual experiences of others need to be respected. The African bishops were hoping for an explicit development on Animism. The debate was so startling that some fathers even said, if adopted, it would impede the pastoral work of the Church.

While presenting the fourth draft on 20 November, 1964, Cardinal Bea alluded to the parable of mustard seed to the growth of a tree to describe the progressive enlargement of the original draft on the Jews to the Declaration on other religions, *Nostra Aetate*. This explains why the section on Jews is disproportionately longer than the sections on other religions. However this

text could not be passed in that session.¹⁶ In between the third and fourth sessions (1964-65) effective campaigns were made by both Arabs and Jews in the press, involving politicization of the text that the secretariat found itself forced to modify the text and distribute a new text in August 1965. The section on Jews which was titled previously "On the Jews", now became "The Jewish Religion" emphasizing thereby that the Council's whole concern was of religious nature. Like this many modifications were made to clarify the purely religious concern of the Council.¹⁷

This text, modified for the fifth time, was submitted to the Council on 14th and 15th October 1965. Even now it met with some objections from some bishops, who feared that it would lead to indifferentism and lessen the missionary thrust of the Church. All the same, it was approved with a great majority of votes¹⁸ and proclaimed by Pope Paul VI on 28 October 1965¹⁹.

Being an ecumenical council, Vat II gave ample scope to bishops from all over the world to meet together and learn from the full scope of the Church's concerns, thereby to widen their horizons. In this case for example the European bishops had the firsthand knowledge of the holocaust and so were very much for passing the text on the Jews. Whereas the bishops from Asia, unfamiliar with the context of persecution of the Jews, emphasized the role of their local religions which they were keen on introducing into the text. So the new text brings out the 'widening of horizons' by the affirming that all people of the earth with their various religions form one community and that the Church respects the spiritual, moral and cultural values of Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam.²⁰

To sum up,

It is almost by accident (or, to put it in a religious terminology, a sheer act of providence) that the course of events between 1960 and 1965 that led the Council to plan and work out the Declaration of other religions. It all

began with the good-will of Pope John XXIII to open up dialogue with the Jews. Even the choice of Pope as well as his calling for the Council was clearly proof of the providential design. It was his openness of mind to read the signs of times that made him seriously to consider the Jewish question in Nov. 1960 which became the seed for developing into a plant which in turn yielded the fruit of *Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions*. It is this “providential afterthought” that turned out to be the Catholic Charter of Interreligious Dialogue the contents of which will be the focus of our next part.

PART 2: THE CONCILIAR CHARTER OF INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE

The *Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions, Nostra Aetate* is rightly considered as “the *magna carta* of the Roman Catholic Church’s new approach.”²¹ It is “one of the shortest documents from Vatican II, but one of the most historically significant. It stemmed from and ushered in a radically different way of relating to other religions.”²² So, it is important to analyze this document in detail. It has just five Articles, with 20 paragraphs on the whole.

2.1. Preamble (NA 1: 1)²³

The opening paragraph explains the rationale of the document. The time of the Council was the time when the ‘one-world’ theory was already getting realized in various ways. The trade systems of colonization had expanded to the patterns of globalization.²⁴ There was an interconnected network of politics and economics, each nation instituting its embassy in every other to foster mutual understanding and amity. Modern science and technology had spread such a quick means of communication and fast ways of conveyance that there was also a good network of communications and

culture. The whole world has become a psychological neighbourhood in which interpersonal relationships of people are becoming closer and ties between nations have become stronger.

In such a context, it is but inevitable that religious diversity is brought into even greater awareness. This is the first time in history that people realize that human race is one and that there is one history of the world. In this new world-situation, if tension and hatred would spread, that too in the name of religion, it would be dangerous because the very same modern technology could be used for massive destruction, even to the extent of instantaneous annihilation of humankind.

Taking note of this new global context the Church is determined to adopt a new and friendly attitude toward other nations. She is intent upon contributing to inner communion of good will and avoiding anything that would lead to destruction. The Council realizes that it is Church's duty²⁵ to foster unity and charity not only among individuals but also peoples. Thus, it is this judicious reading of the signs of the times that moves the Church to examine with greater care the relation which she has to non-Christian religions. "Ever aware of her duty to foster unity and charity among individuals, and even among nations, she reflects at the outset what men have in common what tends to promote fellowship among them"(NA 1:1).

2.2. Points of Commonality (NA 1:2 & 3– Art2:1)

A significant point of the Council's positive new approach is its perception that a really fraternal dialogue will grow among humans only if the socially motivated interpersonal relationship is strengthened by the strong basis of spiritual and moral bonds offered by religion.²⁶ It is to provide for the spiritual and moral basis of dialogue among people that the Council puts forward many points of commonality which would foster fellowship among people. It is indeed striking to note that the document enumerates as many as

ten points of commonality. They may be listed in the following numerical order although the conciliar text contains them all together in a few paragraphs.²⁷

1. “One is the community of peoples”(NA 1:2). Though people are of different and belong to various races yet they all form one ‘human community’ because they all are created in the image and likeness. Again they all are endowed with the indwelling Spirit.

2. “One is their origin”(NA 1:2). Today people are involved in the process of unification of human race by increasing human relations both at the individual as well as international levels. But this process is not merely a human attempt. From our religious standpoint it is part of divine plan of creation. All stem from one stock, the first parents.

3. “All are having the same earth as their abode” (NA 1:2). Not only were humans created as one family, but they all are provided with the one ‘*eikos*.’ So, the human habitat becomes one more commonality of unification.

4. “One is also their final goal” (NA 1:2). The divine plan of unification of human race is evident not only from the origin, but also in the eschatological goal. All are moving towards the same destiny, the heavenly city. (Rev. 21:23 f)

5. “His providence, his manifestation of goodness extend to all human beings”. (NA 1:2) If the providential care of God is extended to all human beings, both the good and the evil alike, then surely people of other religions are also included in the providential care of one universal Father.

6. “The saving plan of God is one and the same (NA 1:2). From our standpoint of Judeo-Christian faith, the common fate of the humankind after the fall is met by the universal promise of salvation, which he carries out in the course of history in ways known to Him. But n so far as those ways are of ‘His saving design’ they are to be seen as one plan of salvation.

7. The points of commonality mentioned above are more known in the light of revelation. But there is one point of commonality which is empirically evident. It is the very human situation in which every human being finds oneself. It is the fundamental predicament or the unsolved riddle of human existence, the ultimate questions of human life expressed in the form of various questions: What is man? What is the meaning and purpose of life? What is upright behavior, and what is sinful? Where does suffering originate, and what end does it serve? How can genuine happiness be found? And finally, what is the ultimate mystery beyond human explanation, which embraced our entire existence, from which we take our origin and towards which we tend? (NA1:3b)

8. Religions are nothing but attempts at answers to the profound riddles regarding the human experience: "Other religions found throughout the world also attempt in their own ways to calm the hearts of men by outlining a program of life covering doctrine, moral precepts and sacred rites". (NA 2.2c). So, "men expect from the various religions answers to the profound riddles of the human condition which today, even as of old, deeply stir the hearts of men"(NA1:3a)

9. Having stated that the common starting point of human existence is one and that all religions attempts to meet it, the document proceeds to examine how the religions of humankind face the fundamental problem. Firstly, the religions of peoples with primitive cultures is taken for consideration. They are not systematically explained in and through concepts. But they express a deep awareness of a hidden sacred power, which lies behind the course of nature and the events of human life is perceptible among different peoples throughout history even to the present day (NA 2:1a). This recognition of a hidden power, the Sacred and it results in a deep religious sense which indeed is common to all.

10. This deep religious sense in more advanced civilizations and developed cultures gets organized and systematized through well-defined concepts and exact language to answer the ultimate questions of life. Some have come to the recognition of a Supreme Divinity and even of a Supreme Father. That gives an additional point of commonality between religions on which we could promote fellowship among religions (NA 2: 1 c)

2.3. Positive Points of Hinduism (NA 2: 2a)

It is heartening to note that Declaration illustrates its recognition of the religiosity of other religions with reference to four major religions. In Article 2:2 the Declaration deals with Hinduism. Hinduism is a special type of religion. It does not have a founder. Nor does it have identical creed. It embodies different cults, practices and philosophies. At the popular level it is connected with many local cults with a lot of mythical narratives (*Puranas*) on the origin of the world and gods. Besides, there are the two great epics, the Mahabharata and the Ramayana, which interwove ancient history with age old wisdom, deep religious insight and spiritual riches. Further, there are highly developed thoughts of spirituality focusing on specific approach to spiritual attainment or a state of release or liberation (*moksha*), freedom from all the limitations of this human existence, ignorance, passion, suffering, desire, cycle of births and deaths. They are called the three *margas* (ways or paths). First there is the ascetical practices of yoga, training the body and mind to reach the Attainment (*Karma Marga*). Then there is the way of knowledge (*Jnana Marga*) leading to self-realization or the intuitive awareness of the Ultimate within. Finally the path of devotion or *Bhakti* enables the individual to attain salvation through turning to personal God in total love and surrender.²⁸ All these points are acknowledged by the Document so succinctly as this:

In Hinduism men explore the divine mystery and express it both in the limitless riches of myth and the accurately defined insights

of philosophy. They seek release from the trials of present life by ascetical practices, profound meditation and recourse to God in confidence and love (NA 2: 2a).

2.4. Positive Features in Buddhism (NA 2: 2b)

Buddhism also aims at saving oneself from the bondage of suffering. But it suggests that one should focus on one's inner attitude of detachment and thereby achieve disentanglement from the world of suffering. In this connection it gives meditation as an aid. Through meditation one become aware of nothingness of all the changeable things and in deep confidence prepares oneself for the attainment of total enlightenment and absoluteness, a stage of existence beyond all limitations.

After Buddha, there arose from his teachings two principal types of interpretations. The more orthodox and strict school struck to the more ethical and interpretation and so was called *Hinayana* Buddhism ('travelers by a lesser vehicle') whereas *Mahayana* Buddhism ('travelers by a greater vehicle') introduced the idea of a deity in the religion, making Buddha as the principal deity. All these ideas are summed up in the *Declaration* concisely thus:

Buddhism in its various forms testifies to the essential inadequacy of this changing world. It proposes a way of life by which men can, with confidence and trust, attain a state of perfect liberation and reach supreme illumination either through their own efforts or by the aid of divine help. (NA 2: 2b)

2.5. Other religions (NA 2: 3)

Apart from the two great religions considered above, the document refers to other religions. They would include the religions of ancient cultures

like that of Egyptian, Babylonian or the Greek. Or they would refer to the religions which are still alive even now such as the Parsi, Shinto, and Confucian. It is thoughtful of the Council to recall the value of these religions too:

Likewise other religions found everywhere try to counter the restlessness of the human heart, each in its own manner, by proposing "ways", comprising teachings, rules of life and sacred rites. (NA 2: 2c)

2.6. Islam (NA 3: 1&2)

Article 3 is devoted to the Church's relation with Islam. It indicates the special link that exist between Christians and Muslims.

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 worship Jesus as a prophet, his virgin Mother they also honour, 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. (NA 3:1)

The Council does not ignore the fact that many quarrels and hostilities have arisen between Christians and Moslems, beginning with the conquest of the Middle East, of Africa and Spain by the Arabs, continued in the Crusades and the wars against the Turks. The document humbly remembers the past faults and exhorts everyone to remove the inherited antagonism and to work sincerely for mutual understanding. We are exhorted to remember the common patrimony. Besides we have to face a common task in the modern world, to

cooperate for social and economic progress mainly of the underprivileged. Moral values will have to be promoted in the context of widespread materialism. Above all we must work together to preserve peace and freedom. (NA : 3:2).

2.7. Judaism (NA 4:1-8)

Article 4 of the document is dedicated to Church's relation with Judaism. It is actually the original note which Pope John XXIII had invited Cardinal Bea to prepare for presentation to the Council. It is from that seed that the rest of the document had flowered. Obviously therefore this portion is fairly large consisting of 8 paragraphs, starting with the statement on "the spiritual ties which link the people of the New Covenant to the stock of Abraham (NA 4:1)

The document recognizes that the Jewish religion was principle and the very type of the Church, and that "her faith and election is to be found in the patriarchs, Moses and the prophets". It is as a continuation of the revelation of the Old Testament Christ was born in flesh. In fact what the Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles reveal is the archetype of salvation as well as its refusal, the best and worst of human response. (NA 4: 2).

The best include Virgin Mary, the apostles, the pillars on which the Church stands, Mary Magdalene, Zacchaeus and many of those early Disciples of Christ all of whom are of Jewish descent. (NA 4:3). The worst response is represented by those who refused Christ plotting his death: Judas and the high priests. Just because they also happen to be Jews, it does not mean that the Jews as a whole is culpable.

What is said of the Jews is not a past history alien to us, but is applicable to us even now²⁹. Salvation and sin, between which we make a daily choice, are thus objectivized before us in the Bible. Each time we move toward the

best exemplars, we prolong and confirm the living mystery of the incarnation and redemption. Each time we go in the opposite direction, we prolong the mystery of refusal, exclusion and execution of the God-made Man. The description of the Jews in the Bible is typical of the universal response, which we continue and yet one that judges us. So the document refrains from judging the Jews as against the past practice (NA 4:4)

On the contrary, the document proceeds to emphasize the richness of the spiritual patrimony common to Jews and Christians which it wants to foster, with a call to promote mutual understanding (NA 4:5). It even urges that "all should teach nothing but what conforms to the truth of the Gospel and the spirit of Christ (NA4:6). Moreover the Council condemns every persecution against any one and the manifestation of anti-Semitism directed against any one at anytime (NA4:7). Again it makes it a duty of Christian to preach the cross of Christ more as the sign of God's all-embracing love rather than simply as the result of a plot of Jews. (NA 4:8)

2.8. Universal Brotherhood (NA 5:1-3)

The concluding Article of the document has three components. First, the one fatherhood of God and universal brotherhood of all humanity is set as the broad basis of the mutual relationship of all people. 'If we truly call upon God, the Father of all, and if we refuse to treat in a brotherly way then we will only falsify our love of God' (NA 5:1). As a consequence, then, any discrimination is rejected as foreign to the mind of Christ. Every one's dignity is to be respected (NA 5:2). Finally the Document ends with the following prayer:

Accordingly, following in the footsteps of the holy Apostle Peter and Paul, this sacred Synod ardently implores the Christian faithful "to maintain good fellowship among the nations" (1.Pet.2: 12) and, if possible, as far as in them lies, to keep in peace with

all people (Rom. 12:18) so that they may truly be children of the Father who is in heaven (Mt. 5:45)". (NA 5: 3).

It is significant that the concluding prayer is made with the support of the biblical sources. This itself is a clear proof that the moves taken in the Council are not motivated by reasons of expediency or opportunism but they are all truly founded on its own Sources. Thus the document which we term as "The Charter of Dialogue", is truly a religious response to the needs of our times. Taking cognizance of the points of commonalities among religions and examining the genuinely spiritual values of other religions, the Council has boldly come out to promote fellowship among religions and peace with all people.

PART 3: OTHER TEACHINGS OF THE COUNCIL ON INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE

No one should take the promulgation of *Nostra Aetate* as the only proof of the Council's good will to establish interreligious relations. The whole outlook of the Council is itself coloured by dialogue. Its approach to sort out issues is deeply dialogical. This was certainly the result of the dialogical tone set by Pope John XXII while convoking the Council. His worthy successor Pope Paul VI also manifested the same dialogical spirit in concrete ways.³⁰ Hence the dialogical spirit of both the conciliar Popes had certainly inspired and influenced the Council Fathers too.

The positive recognition of a wide concern and acceptance of people of other religions became the hall mark of the Council. Understandably then this concern was expressed in many of the documents of the Council. Thus for example the Declaration on Religious Freedom, *Dignitatis Humanae*, lays the foundation for coexistence of people of different religions. The Constitution on Divine Revelation, *Dei Verbum*, encourages the sharing of sacred Scripture with non-Christians; the Decree on the Apostolate of the

Laity, *Aposstolicam Actuositatem*, outlines the cooperation and collaboration between Christians and persons of other faiths. The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, describes how persons of other faiths can experience salvation.³¹ The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes*, spells out the Church's positive attitude to the world, demanding Christians to build up a better world along with the people of other religions. Moreover, the journey which the original note 'On the Jews' had to make by getting inserted into the schemas on ecumenism, on religious freedom, on the Church and finally among other religions, had a significant effect in deliberations on each of these documents and brought forth the fruit of dialogical outlook.³²

Obviously therefore the spirit of dialogue got permeated in other documents as well. So it is also important to glean those bits of observations on dialogue found in other documents and present them in some sort of a synthetic view of the Council on interreligious relations. They may be classified under two main categories: (a) principles pertaining to attitude of dialogue (b) Practical hints for carrying out dialogue-mission

3.1. Principles to be followed in the pursuit of Dialogue

(1) Rejecting nothing of truth and value in other religions:

"The Catholic Church rejects nothing of what is true and holy in these religions" (NA 2:2a).

(2) Recognizing the elements of goodness and the providence of God in other religions:

"In this way (by being introduced to knowledge of other religions) they can better understand the elements of goodness and truth which such religions possess by God's Providence (OT 16: 6 a & b)

(3) Respecting the precepts and practices in other religions:

“She has a high regard for the manner of life and conduct, the precepts and doctrines which, although differing in many ways from her own teaching, nevertheless often reflect a ray of truth which enlightens all men.” (NA 2:2b)

(4) Acknowledging not only social and cultural values of other religions but also their moral and spiritual values:

“Let Christians, while witnessing to their own faith and way of life, acknowledge, preserve and encourage the spiritual and moral truths found among non-Christians, also their social life and culture. (NA 2:3b)

(5) Upholding the good elements in customs, cults and cultures of people of other religions:

“So whatever goodness is found in the minds and hearts of men, or in the particular customs, rites, and cultures of peoples, far from being lost is purified, raised to a higher level and reaches its perfection, for the glory of God, confusion of the demon, and the happiness of man (AG 9:2b).

(6) Extending love and respect to those who think and act differently:

“Respect and love ought to be extended also to those who think or act differently than we do in social, political and religious matters, too. In fact, the more deeply we come to understand their ways of thinking through such courtesy and love, the more easily will we be able to enter into dialogue with them (GS 28:1).

(7) Even preserving and perfecting them:

“... 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 (LG 17 b).

(8) Chalking out a common plan for dialogue

“Qualified ministers are needed to carry out the missionary programmes of a particular Church; they must be prepared in good time and in a manner that is in keeping with the needs of the each Church. Since men are more and more coming together in associations, it would be a good thing for Episcopal Conferences to draw a common plan for dialogue with these groups”. (A.G. 20:7)

(9) Fostering all that is true, good and beautiful

“With loyalty to the Gospel in the fulfillment of its mission in the world, the Church, whose duty it is to foster and elevate all that is true, all that is good, and all that is beautiful in the human community, consolidates, peace among men for the glory of God” (Cf. Lk. 2:14) (GS 76:8)

3.3. Practical Hints

Besides laying down some principles to be followed regarding our attitude to followers of other religions, the Council also gave many practical hints that would enhance the promotion of the dialogical relation with other religions. They may be also serialized in the following order:

(1) Forget the past quarrels and promote peace

“The sacred Council now pleads with all to forget the past, and urges that a sincere effort be made to achieve mutual understanding; for the benefit of all men, let them together preserve and promote peace, liberty, social justice and moral values” (NA 3:2).

(2) Emphasize the spiritual patrimony through studies and dialogues

“Since the spiritual patrimony common to Christians and Jews is thus so great, this sacred Synod wishes to foster and recommend that mutual understanding and respect which is the fruit above all of biblical and theological studies, and of brotherly dialogues.”(N.A. 4:6)

(3) Form conscience through dialogue

“For this reason everybody has the duty and consequently the right to seek the truth in religious matters so that, through the use of appropriate means, he may prudently form judgments of conscience which are sincere and true (DH 3:1c).

(4) Initiate free inquiry through dialogue

“The search for truth, however, must be carried out in a manner that is appropriate to the dignity of the human person and his social nature, namely, by free enquiry with the help of teaching or instruction, communication and dialogue... Moreover, it is by personal assent that men must adhere to the truth they have discovered.”(DH 3: 2)

(5) Carry out missionary activity not blindly, but scientifically & dialogically

“This office (“Propagation of the Faith”) should have available a permanent group of expert consultants, of proven knowledge or experience. Their duty it will be, among other things to gather pertinent information about local conditions in various regions, the outlook of various groups of men, and the means of evangelization to be used. They will then propose scientifically based conclusions for mission work and cooperation”. (AG 29:7)

(6) Promote many fields of knowledge like philosophy, history, etc.

“Furthermore, when man works in the fields of philosophy, history, mathematics and science and cultivates the arts, he can greatly contribute towards bringing the human race to a higher understanding of truth, goodness, and beauty, to points of view having universal value, thus man will be clearly enlightened by wondrous wisdom which was with God from eternity”. (GS 57:3a)

(7) Devote to the service of public good

“The Church praises and esteems those who devote themselves to the public good for the service of men and take upon themselves the burdens of public office.” (GS 75:1c)

(8) Collaborate with all persons of good will

“Catholics are to be keen on collaborating with all men of good will in the promotion of all that is true, just, holy, all that is worthy of love (Cf. Phil.4:8)” (AA.2)

(9) Dialogue with people of good will

“They are to enter into dialogue with them, approaching them with understanding and courtesy, and are to search for means of improving social and public institutions along the lines of the Gospel. (AA.2)

(10) Team up with others in all common projects

Christians ought to interest themselves, and collaborate with others, in the right ordering of social and economic affairs. ... They should furthermore share in the efforts of those people who, in fighting against famine, ignorance and disease, are striving to bring about better living conditions and bring about peace in the world. In this work the faithful, after due consideration, should be eager to collaborate in projects initiated by private, public, state, or international bodies, or by other Christian or even non-Christian communities. (A.G.12:2)

(11) Enter political life and work for the common good

“In their patriotism and in their fidelity to their civic duties Catholics will feel themselves bound to promote the true common good.... Catholics versed in politics and, as should be the case, firm in the faith and Christian teaching, should not decline to enter public life; for by a worthy discharge of their functions, they can work for the common good and at the same time prepare the way for the Gospel.” (AA14:1b)

(12) Involve in politics too

Christians must be conscious of their specific and proper role in the political community: they should be a shining example by their sense of responsibility and their dedication to the common good; they should show in practice how authority can be reconciled with freedom, personal initiative and with the solidarity and the needs of the whole social framework, and the advantages of unity with profitable diversity. (GS 75:5)

(13) Give due recognition of the diversity of opinions

“They should recognize the legitimacy of differing points of view about the organization of worldly affairs and show respect for their fellow citizens, who even in association defend their opinions by legitimate means”. (GS 75:5)

(14) Build up the world

“...there is no question, then, of the Christian message inhibiting men from building up the world or making them disinterested in the good of their fellows: on the contrary it is an incentive to do these very things”.(GS 34:3)

(15) Improve the earth's condition

“By the work of his hands and with the aid of technical means man tills the earth to bring forth fruit and to make it a dwelling place fit for all mankind; he also consciously plays his part in the life of social groups; in so doing he is realizing the design which God revealed at the beginning of time,

to subdue the earth and perfect the creation and at the same time he is improvising his own person he is also observing the command of Christ to devote himself to the service of his fellowmen".(GS 57:2)

(16) Work with others with a faith incentive

"... this involves not a lesser, but rather a greater commitment to working with all men towards the establishment of a world that is more human. Indeed, the mystery of Christian faith provides them with an outstanding incentive and encouragement to fulfill their role even more eagerly and to discover the full sense of the commitment" (GS 57:1)

(17) Promote fraternal dialogue on the basis of God's love and Christ's model

"Christian charity is extended to all without distinction of race, social condition, or religion, and seeks neither gain nor gratitude....the Church, through its children joins itself with men of every condition, but especially with the poor and afflicted,... It shares their joys and sorrows, it is familiar with the hopes and problems of life, it suffers with them in the anguish of death. It wishes to enter into fraternal dialogue with those who are working for peace, and to bring them the peace and light of the Gospel". (AG 12:1)

CONCLUDING REMARKS: THE CHALLENGE AHEAD

From the foregoing it is clear that Vat II invites us to look at religions as the responses to the action of Spirit in the hearts of human beings as well as in their traditions. This in turn calls for a positive approach to all religions. It also initiates the Church into not only a mission of dialogue with other religions but also of cooperation and collaboration with them for common action to create a better world, the Kingdom of God. At this juncture, one cannot but indicate some of the issues and challenges that the conciliar vision of dialogue has left.

Formerly, the Church viewed all other religions as to be conquered and converted. Although Christianity is intimately connected with Jewish religion not only because of its origin but also because it is built upon the revelation Jews had received from God, yet its relation had been rather bitter. Gradually it considered that the Jewish people were rejected by God and that their salvation lay in their accepting Christ as their saviour and so conversion to Christianity was considered a *sine qua non*. Likewise, other religions were often considered as pagan, or even satanic in nature and so the salvation of others also lay in their conversion to Christianity. When some scholars came to know and appreciate spiritual riches in the great religions they were officially not recognized. Or they were even looked upon with skeptical eyes and with some concern. Those religions at best were seen merely as 'merely human efforts' or 'primitive in spiritual beliefs' which needed to be fulfilled by Christian revelation.

As against such a view therefore the Council's teachings on dialogue seem to involve a sea-change. After coming to know of the changed outlook of the Council, one may wonder whether the Council made a cheap compromise with its traditional idea of mission. Church's claim in the past was that "Christ is the salvation of the world, and the message of salvation is entrusted to the Church; it is her duty to offer the Gospel to all others. She has authority to do so as Christ has sent her, and has assured her of his assistance."³³ Are these truth-claims flown off today because of the Council's teachings on dialogue?

Such questions are perhaps best addressed by the following observations of Neuner. There is no question of weakening these basic truths; they remain valid, as always. But the Church can proclaim the Gospel wherever her authority is already recognized. In the past it was taken for granted that people would accept her authority. But in the modern world it can no longer

do so. Many creeds, religions and ideologies claim equal rights in society. As the Council has already declared in another documents,³⁴ she cannot force people to accept the Gospel as no one has the right to interfere with the sincere convictions of others. Therefore the Church must only meet people on equal terms, without insisting on her authority. She must first insert herself into human society, be connected with people through bonds of friendship and mutual esteem and live among them with sincere charity. Even while involved in interreligious dialogue, and cooperating with others on the common projects for the Reign of God, we are bound to offer our Christian perspective. The Pastoral Constitution on the Church rightly admonishes us that while we consider the problems of modernity and particularly the common problems of society, the Church will “clarify these problems in the light of the Gospel and will furnish mankind with the saving resources which the Church has received from its founder, under the promptings of the Holy Spirit.”(GS 3:1b).

In the new approach, therefore, what is considered important is this: “the human person deserves to be preserved; that the human society deserves to be renewed. Hence the pivotal point of our total presentation will be man himself, whole and entire, body and soul, heart and conscience, mind and will” (GS 3:1c)³⁵ In other words, Church today sees her mission in terms of preserving the genuinely human person and renew the human society in the light of the Gospel.

Here a related issue is: What do we mean by ‘salvation’? If one understands it as a ‘thing’ then the former understanding of mission may be valid. But if one understands it “not as a spiritual, personal thing but a challenge to humanity to overcome its own evil,”³⁶ then we need to respect other human beings and collaborate with them in order to establish new human beings and renewed society. This is precisely what is implied in the above-given words of the *Gaudium et Spes*.

Again it is in his connection that *Gaudium et Spes* also makes another bold statement:

The joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the men of our time, especially of those who are poor or afflicted in any way, are the joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the followers of Christ as well. Nothing that is genuinely human fails to find an echo in their hearts... For theirs is a community composed of men... That's why Christians cherish a feeling of deep solidarity with the human race and its history. (GS 1 a & c)

The Council even felt an urgency of cherishing solidarity with 'all' human beings:³⁷

In our times a **special obligation binds** us to make ourselves the neighbor of absolutely every person, and of actively helping him when he comes across our path, whether he be an old person abandoned by all, a foreign labourer unjustly looked down upon, a refugee, a child born of an unlawful union and wrongly suffering for a sin he did not commit, or a hungry person who disturbs our conscience by recalling a voice of the Lord: "As long as you did it for one of these, the least of my brethren, you did it for me" Mt.25:4)

(GS 27:2)³⁸

In this new approach to mission the Church also comes to realize that dialogue is the eloquent means of establishing this relationship of solidarity openly (GS 3:1), to speak to everybody irrespective of differences (GS 2:1), about holistic mission in today's world, not simply conversion by any means (DH 4:4). And to engage ourselves in the actual struggles as well as offering saving resources of ours to the world, also readily receiving assistance from others, irrespective of their belief or no belief (GS 91:1), and thus work with all.

In a word, the new awareness of the mission of Church is to identify with every member of the human family, to plan together with them, to get help from every one of them, and work together with them for the betterment irrespective of religious affiliation.

In fine, then, the following words of Cardinal Kaspar will establish the relevance of the mission of dialogue as put forward by Vat.II:

...the insights and teachings of the Council have never been more relevant and fundamental. The Council continues to be the corner stone on which to build the future of dialogue, on which we base the search for full communion among the baptized; understanding, collaboration and respect between Christianity and Judaism; and the dialogue with other religions.

We have begun to seek real encounter; we have contributed to mutual understanding of each other; and we have interwoven friendships. We have a sharper awareness that the world can no longer tolerate reciprocal ignorance, indifference and suspicion; we see more clearly that it is our duty to enter into dialogue in order to better our world and to purify our Church of the sin of division.³⁹

(Endnotes)

¹ John J. Markey, "George Washington, Napoleon, John Paul II and the Future of Vatican II Revolution" in *Seattle Theology and Ministry Review* 3, 2003, pp.14-25 p.15

²e.g. from hierarchical concept of the Church to people-centred Church, or from a triumphalist Church to servant Church, or from a narrow view of grace to a view that it is a gift of God, which is much wider and more pervasive in life of people and history

³ The new participatory structures in the Church such as Parish Pastoral Council, Diocesan Pastoral Council and, Synod of Bishops etc. may be cited as new

⁴ Making the triple functions of Christ as applicable to all the baptized rather than the former view they were the sole prerogatives of the clergy .

⁵ Introduction of *coram populo*, vernacular in liturgy or making the priest play more a coordinating role in Eucharist rather than ritualistic performer of sacrifice

⁶ Making the Church move beyond the Western centric culture and making it enter into communion with all the local cultures of the world.

⁷ Edward Idris cardinal Cassidy, *Ecumenism and Interreligious Dialogue: Unitatis Redintegratio, Nostra Aetate*, New York: Paulist Press, 2005, p. 128.

⁸ *Documents of Vatican II*, Ed. Walter M. Abbot, American Press, 13th Printing p.712

⁹ *Documents of Vatican II*, Ed. Walter M. Abbotp. 712-13,

¹⁰ Charles E. Curran, "The Church as the Pilgrim of God" in Eds. William Madges and Michael J. Daley, *Vatican II: Forty Personal Stories*, Bayard: Twenty Third publications, 2003, pp. 86-88.

¹¹ Edward P. Hahnenberg, *A concise Guide to the Documents of Vatican II*, Cincinnati: St. Anthony Messenger Press, 2007, The mission debate in the Vat II p. 156

¹² Rene Laurentis and Joseph Neuner, *The Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions, A Commentary*, Glen Rock: Paulist Press, 1966, p.21-22.

¹³ Rene Laurentis and Joseph Neuner, p.22

¹⁴ Hahnenberg *op.cit.* p. 157

¹⁵ While introducing this draft in the council, Cardinal Bea explained in detail the various struggles connected with the writing of the text. Taking hues from Pauline theology, it is in Christ that the division of Jews and gentiles is healed, and both are reconciled with the Father. Again it is Christ's healing mission that is the sign of God's all-embracing love. This is precisely a proof that salvation has come in Christ and is the most important theological reason for dialogue, not only with Jews but with every people of the nations. This draft emphasized that on the account of the common heritage with Judaism the Council encouraged and promoted studies and discussion that would further mutual knowledge. The draft also deplored outbreaks of hatred and persecution against Jews.

¹⁶ The main reason is that people were all going through fatigue and hustle of the session's end. Besides their worries were concentrated on the related Declaration on Religious Freedom (which is of immense value for the theme of interreligious dialogue) that was going through its most serious crisis, as it had evoked two thousand suggestions from the floor.

¹⁷ If interested in the details of modifications please see Rene Laurentin and Joseph Neuner, *op.cit* pp.38-43

¹⁸ Out of 2,080 who voted, 1,821 were in the affirmative and just 245 against it, 14 invalid, Cf. Cardinal Edward p.128

¹⁹ Hahnenberg, *op.cit.* p.158

²⁰ Robert A. Graham "Non Christians", in *Documents of Vatican II*, Walter M. Abbot, America Press 1966, p. 658

²¹ John B. Cobb Jr. and Ward M. McAfee, Eds. *The Dialogue Comes of Age Christian Encounters with Other traditions*, , Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010,

²² Cardinal Edward Idris Cassidy, *Ecumenism and Interreligious Dialogue –Unitatis Redintegratio, Nostra Aetate*, published by the Paulist Press , 2005

²³ In giving the citation from the council documents, the following procedure is followed: The first two capital letters indicate the name of the document in the Latin, in its abbreviated form. The Arabic number that follows the name indicates the Article in the document. If an Article consists of more than a paragraph, then the Article-number is followed by colon and another Arabic number is given to indicate the exact paragraph from which the citation is taken. If a paragraph is too long, then one of the small initials ‘ a, b, c,’ is given immediately after the paragraph-number to signify that the citation is taken from its ‘earlier’ or ‘ middle’ or ‘last’ portion’ respectively.

²⁴ Raymond F. Bulman and Frederick J. Parrella, Eds. *From Trent to Vatican II: Historical and Theological Investigations*, New York: OUP, 2006, p. 277

²⁵ As we believe that the whole human race is to be judged by Christ (Acts 17:31) at the end of times, and that the saved will march into the Holy City in splendor and glory (Rev. 21: 2-27) it is both our duty and charity to foster unity among humans already now.

²⁶ Cf. “One of the most striking features of today’s world is the intense development of interpersonal relationships due in no small measure to modern technical advances. Nevertheless genuine fraternal dialogue is advanced not so much on this level as at the deeper level of personal fellowship, and this calls for mutual respect for the full spiritual dignity of men as persons. Christian revelation greatly fosters the establishment of such fellowship and at the same time promotes deeper understanding of the laws of social living with which the creator has endowed man’s spiritual and moral nature“.(GS 23:1)

²⁷ They are culled out from the second and third paragraphs of the Article 1 and the first para of Art. 2.

²⁸ Rene Laurentin and Joseph Neuner, *op.cit.* p.89

²⁹ Rene Laurentin and Joseph Neuner, *op.cit.* p. 75-76

³⁰ Releasing his encyclical *Ecclesiam Suam* in which the term ‘dialogue’ was introduced and explained, attending the 39th Eucharistic Congress in India, and meeting leaders of other religions and appreciating them on equal ground as religious persons, establishing the Secretariat for other religions etc

³¹ Raymond F. Bulman and Frederick J. Parrella, *op.cit* p.270

³² Rene Laurentin and Joseph Neuner, *op.cit* p.35

³³ Cf. Rene Laurentin and Joseph Neuner, p. 80

³⁴ Declaration on Religious Freedom, *Dignitatis Humanae* No 12

³⁵Other citations to confirm the above mentioned contention may be found in *Ad Gentes* 7: 1c, and *Gaudium et Spes* 10:2

³⁶Eugene J. Fisher, "The Council and the Invention of Catholic-Jewish Relations" in William Madges and Michel J. Daley, Eds., *Vatican II Forty Personal Stories*, Bayard: Twenty-Third Publications, pp. 176-179

³⁷For many other citations in support of the same point Cf. A. Pushparajan, *Second Vatican Council on Dialogue*, Bangalore: SFS Publications, pp.31-32

³⁸ Emphasis is added

³⁹Kasper, Cardinal Walter's remarks on the day of release of Cardinal Edward Idris Cassidy's book, *Rediscovering Vatican II: Ecumenism and Interreligious Dialogue*, on 01.11.2005, Cf. the website: <http://www.jcrelations.net/Rediscovering+Vatican+II%3A+Ecumenism+and+Interreligious+Dialogue.2956.0.html?L=3>