The How, What, and Why of Interreligious Reading after Vatican II

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In 1979, five years before his death, Karl Rahner—prolific German writer and papal theological expert at the Second Vatican Council—proposed that at the Council a new “epoch” in Church history had been initiated. Rahner predicted that the new era would involve changes no less drastic than those that arose at the Jerusalem Council when the apostolic church determined that circumcision was no longer necessary for salvation (Acts 15). Instead of dividing Church history into Antiquity, Middle Ages, and Modern, Rahner proposed we think of these—Jewish, European, and World Christianity—declaring that “it is incontestable that at Vatican II the Church appeared for the first time as a world Church.” Before Vatican II, Rahner stridently notes, earlier conciliar and papal determinations were akin to the activities of a “firm which exported a European religion as a commodity it did not really want to change but sent throughout the world together with the rest of the culture and civilization it considered superior.” In his assessment of the Council almost forty years ago, Rahner presaged much of the discussion in David Ford’s book, which offers a broad introduction to why Roman Catholics should read interreligiously and how they might begin.

Interreligious Reading for Catholics: Why?

As the title of this book indicates, the Vatican II documents are mined as an impetus for reading across faith boundaries in three disciplines. Following Ford’s introduction with cogent summaries of each essay, Michael Barnes, SJ introduces the reader to the Vatican II documents. Whereas Trent’s tone was “legal,” Barnes notes, the documents of Vatican II are “primarily inspirational” (11), opening the church to the “possibility of new life in the Spirit” (26). This new life need not abandon dogma but rather embrace, as Yves Congar writes, “ecumenical dialogue [that] involves paying attention to the way in which doctrine is expressed, so that it can be understood by the other.” Following Barnes’s panorama of the Vatican II documents, Ford’s edited volume progresses through perspectives on interreligious reading in

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2 Ibid., 718.
3 Ibid., 717.
6 Quoted in Barnes, 25.
three categories: Scriptural Reasoning (SR), Comparative Theology (CT), and Receptive Ecumenism (RE).

In only fourteen densely-packed pages, Kevin Hughes\(^7\) forges a way forward for Scriptural Reasoners in both their houses of faith and their academies as *deep reasonings* are discovered and shared. Hughes lauds the “hermeneutical reorientation”\(^8\) begun by Daniélou and de Lubac and encouraged by *Dei Verbum*, which offers a “potential for a radical postliberal re-centering of Catholic theology and practice on the ‘world of life-giving signs’\(^9\) through a reconnection to the tradition of patristic and medieval scriptural understanding” (42). Scholars need not abandon objectivity and historicity, Hughes claims, when they embark upon an older model of reading texts: a “holistic return to ‘the four-fold sense’ aims to place scripture at the heart of Christian thought and practice, in a way that can integrate the best of scholarship without erasing the lived connections of traditional Biblical theology” (40). I agree wholeheartedly with Hughes’ embrace of multiple models of reading. When teaching an Introduction to the New Testament course, I require students to use multiple exegetical tools—historical criticism, narrative and form criticism, reception history, as well as the “four-fold sense”—a process which opens their eyes to meanings in the text they might not otherwise have discovered.

Paul D. Murray\(^10\) charts broad families of learning, focusing primarily on healing divisions within Christianity through RE as he holds out hope for “mutual journeying to a new relationship” (84). Murray’s essay exemplifies this book’s deep respect for distinct traditions and for Peter Ochs’s therapeutic model of SR—to ease the tension between faiths while affirming the truths that may be found in each, including the goal of “learning to live [our differences] well” (78). RE, in particular, “views the task of comparative ecumenical ecclesiology as a form of diagnostic, therapeutic analysis—a means of address and repair—for experienced systemic ills and which thereby deliberately seeks to be an agent of change” (81). Murray’s approach emphasizes the *receptivity* necessary in RE relationships and is surely the first step in living differences well.

The Vatican II document *Ad Gentes* begins with both mandate and justification for the missionary activity of the church: “Divinely sent to the nations of the world to be unto them ‘a universal sacrament of salvation,’\(^11\) the Church, driven by the inner necessity of her own catholicity, and obeying the mandate of her Founder (cf. Mark 16:16), strives ever to proclaim


\(^{8}\) Brian Daley’s term in his assessment of *Dei Verbum*, quoted by Hughes, 42.

\(^{9}\) Brian Daley’s term.

\(^{10}\) “Families of Receptive Theological Learning: Scriptural Reasoning, Comparative Theology, and Receptive Ecumenism,” 76-92.

\(^{11}\) From the Catholic Catechism: "The Church, in Christ, is like a sacrament—a sign and instrument, that is, of communion with God and of unity among all men." The Church's first purpose is to be the sacrament of the *inner union of men with God*. Because men's communion with one another is rooted in that union with God, the Church is also the sacrament of the *unity of the human race*. In her, this unity is already begun, since she gathers men "from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and tongues"; at the same time, the Church is the "sign and instrument" of the full realization of the unity yet to come. (I. 2.3.9.1.1.775). [http://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc_css/archive/catechism/p123a9p1.htm](http://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc_css/archive/catechism/p123a9p1.htm)
the Gospel to all men” (*Ad Gentes*, 1). In many ways, this volume, and especially Ford’s own essay in it, is the playing out of the desire to engage the world within the strictures which Christianity imposes when it declares that Jesus Christ alone—“exclusive, universal, and absolute” (Ford, quoting *Dominus Iesus* 15, 113)—is the answer to the world’s brokenness. The impetus to bring that belief to a group of thinkers who embrace another faith (problematic as that may be in an Abrahamic tent), is certainly foundational to a Catholic’s desire to engage in interreligious reading; yet Barnes, Hughes, and Murray set such “missionary activity” in a collegial atmosphere of inspiration and receptivity. Throughout the essays, a commitment to Ochs’s therapeutic model is paramount. These authors continue to seek an easing of the tension between faiths while yet affirming the truths that may be found in each. Quoting Clooney, Murray offers one of the best reasons for a Catholic to engage in interreligious reading—the strengthening of one’s own faith: “That for me the work of CT finally discloses a still deeper encounter with Jesus Christ only intensifies the commitment to learn from the religious diversity God has given us. In Christ there need not be any fear of what we might learn; there is only the truth that sets us free” (82). After these broad introductions, Ford’s book continues with essays that target specific disciplines, raising both questions and suggestions for paths forward.

**Interreligious Reading for Catholics: How?**

David Dault paints with sweeping strokes as he envisions the Roman voice within SR, offering a model for use within Catholic circles of dialogue. Exuding doubt about the limitations of SR for Catholics who rely on the Magisterium and Tradition, he questions how to define the convergence of preparatory readings (catechesis, doctrinal training, in-house scripture study) and typical tripartite SR conversations. The fault lines in Christianity are problematic for Dault because the text itself is not standard; the result has been, Dault says, that SR groups “most often defaulted to a ‘Christianity’ best defined as both Protestant and postliberal” (49). After unveiling these troubling aspects of SR for Roman Catholics, Dault proposes two magisterial models with which to move forward—each patterned after SR either in format or in the “dialogical space” (60) they exhibit. Such Catholic Reasoning, including text-based dialogue on the Vatican documents, may provide a comfort zone that Dault obviously believes Catholics have not previously experienced within SR groups. As a Lutheran, I would not attempt to shake my Catholic brother’s reliance on the authority of Tradition and Magisterium; I applaud his plea to encourage the use of approved Catholic versions (NABRE, NRSV, TEV) within SR groups; and

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12 See also *Ad Gentes* 22, which signals a proper Roman Catholic understanding of both mission and Church authority: “To achieve this goal, it is necessary that in each major socio-cultural area, such theological speculation should be encouraged, in the light of the universal Church's tradition, as may submit to a new scrutiny the words and deeds which God has revealed, and which have been set down in Sacred Scripture and explained by the Fathers and by the magisterium.”

13 See Tracy Sayuki Tiemeier’s essay “Interreligious Reading in the Context of Dialogue: When Interreligious Reading ‘Fails’” (139-154) in the same volume.

I hope that for him, new depths of his own faith may be mined because of ongoing interreligious reading.

Anna Bonta Moreland introduces a thought experiment contemplating Muhammad as prophet for both Christians and Muslims. Admitting that Christians do not consider the Qur’an divine revelation, Moreland nonetheless urges that we consider Aquinas’ analogical model to find a compromise between two extremes. She writes, “Christians can revere Muhammad as a prophet in a limited and relative sense, not one that Muslims would embrace, but one that Christians nevertheless should consider” (73). Though Moreland stretches the boundaries of Vatican II documents when she proposes a “theology of religious pluralism” (70), her proposal offers the recovered pathway of analogy to foster fruitful discussion.

David F. Ford cautions that Vatican II’s legacy is “ever more complex” (93), first because of Christianity’s unique claims, calling evangelism “one of the most sensitive and explosive issues between and within the Abrahamic faiths” (115), and second, with Dault, because of the Catholic dependence on the Magisterium for scriptural interpretation. While Moreland proposes an Aquinas end-run of analogy, Ford straightforwardly proposes that the biblical claims cited in Dominus Iesus be used in Scriptural Reasoning groups (an addition I assume Dault would find helpful), allowing Roman Catholics a “space” (115) for both dialogue and evangelism. Ford argues that Catholics need SR, and SR needs post-Vatican II Roman Catholics. The world would surely benefit from post-Vatican II Roman Catholics participating in SR (119) and, as Ad Gentes concludes, “God is fully glorified.”

Mike Higton considers both communal and personal outcomes for interreligious reading and proposes that “doctrinal theology itself be envisaged as a practice of devout scriptural reading” (121) similar to lectio divina. Higton scripts a winsome advertisement for the use of SR as a component of one’s own faith walk, or as he calls it the “discipline of Christian doctrine” (120). For Higton, doctrine is much more than mere statement of truth, but it is actually the shaping of one’s life within the confines of the doctrine. Such doctrinal study becomes, for Higton, “deep doctrinal patterning” (136) which can readily be brought into SR groups. The depth of learning—when we “mine more deeply” (129)—is richer because of the “light of those whose lives have become commentaries, and who by inhabiting and embodying the Christian discipline of reading teach what it means to read well” (129). Higton’s doctrinal patterning—with its aim to “mine more deeply”—may also be a useful model for Jews and Muslims to prepare to gather around the SR table; SR’s goal, we must recall, is not agreement, but understanding and friendship across faith divides.

Tracy Sayuki Tiemeier offers a startlingly honest critique of an interfaith dialogue she experienced. Although begun with lofty goals, the LA Hindu-Catholic Dialogue group met failure, and Tiemeier attributes this failure to both fear and power. First, she notes, some in the...
Hindu community suspected that dialogue with Roman Catholics was merely a ruse for evangelism. Secondly, Tiemeier insists that the “problem of power in inter-religious reading” (152) must be addressed with honesty. Tiemeier’s own honesty in examining the failure counter-balances her forthright criticism that continual “self-examination and analysis of privilege” (153) are necessary in moving forward in interreligious reading “if Comparative Theology is ever to shake the charge of hegemony” (153).

Nicholas Adams offers philosophical yet concrete advice when he critiques the Foundationalism (a Murray term) and Secular Universalism (an Ochs term) of a rationalist model of dialogue. Adams celebrates, instead, SR and RE’s “alternatives to strategies of agreement” with their acceptance of “long-term disagreement” (163). Instead of the binary solutions offered by many inter-faith discussions (Where can we all agree? Isn’t it all just semantics anyway?), Adams urges a way forward with a get-under-the-skin-of-the-Other method which seeks understanding evidenced by being able to rehearse the claims, conflicts, and the obscurities (168-171) in the Other’s religious understanding. He lauds the honesty required in naming (or assessing) one’s own beliefs, a strategy he detailed years earlier:

What one takes as true is indeed metaphysical in the sense that it structures and informs one’s knowing: there is no getting around it. This does not make it a guarantee of the truth of one’s claims. To acknowledge that one takes something as true is to renounce guarantees or self-evidence.

This essay’s specific directive to understand self and Others so well that one can rehearse such a trio of rarely-voiced differences offers the best definition of Adams’ term “making deep reasonings public” that I have ever encountered.

A Trio of Responses, Charting Hopeful Paths

The final three essays in the book offer clarity on the scope and intention of the book, framing it in its larger interreligious context. First, Francis X. Clooney, SJ introduces his new book, His Hiding Place is Darkness, a reflection on the Song of Songs read alongside the Hindu poetry of Shatakopan. In this context of shadows, Clooney celebrates the convergence of the book’s essays from the three disciplines (SR, CT, RE) with hopes that “reasoning together religiously” (175) might provide a path forward, especially in resolving “what counts as theology in any of its particular denominational forms” (175). Clooney (with Hughes) reminds us that “the

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22 Ibid.

text lives in community” (178) as the early Church Fathers believed. Of course, for a Catholic believer, that community includes Tradition, the Fathers, and conciliar and papal decrees. Yet, Clooney’s conclusion—and his recommendation for the path forward—is that the Catholic reader boldly engage in the interreligious, communal reading (especially SR and RE) that this book depicts, because such a process “keeps requiring that one step outside the ordinary range of Catholic texts and conversations, to read, and read with believers of other traditions” (187). For Clooney, such conversations shed a spectrum of light in our darkness, revealing the hidden God.

Maria Massi Dakake draws from the Qur’an a lovely image for interreligious reading: “A good word is as a good tree; its roots firm and its branches in the sky” (Qur’an 14:24-26). Using this poetic simile, she writes that the Catholic Church is moving “toward a more ‘organic’ rather than a more ‘modern’ approach to its own tradition,” an approach that is “less potentially binary or divisive in nature” and whose fruit may yield “more direct inspiration from scripture” (190). Her essay offers the uninitiated a simple introduction to SR as “a method of reading [which] pushes against deceptively simple, univocal, or obvious interpretations, refusing to turn away from difficult or problematic expressions or passages in scripture, or to abandon sustained contemplation of what makes us unsure or uncomfortable in our own scriptures or those of others” (192). Dakake compares SR’s focus on sacred texts to the medieval Islamic study that requires “the transmitted tradition of the Prophet’s companions and immediate successors” (193), which resembles the Catholic reliance on the Magisterium and Tradition. She agrees with Dault that “a certain level of more or less ‘elite’ training may be particularly helpful” (196) for those readers. With Hughes, Dakake sums up the most important reason for communal, interreligious reading: “as a buffer against the…singular reading of scripture” (197). To allay some Scriptural Reasoners’ discomfort (as Dault and Tiemeier suggested) with moving from their faith house into an Abrahamic tent for interreligious reading, Dakake calls our attention once again to the tree analogy: roots draw nourishment from the faith’s tradition up into the trunk; branches “expand outward to touch, if not fully embrace, what is sacred in other religious traditions” (188). Yet, against that trunk readers may lean: “We may appear to turn our back to it as we turn to face our interlocutors from other religions, but it remains our steady and unmoving support” (200).

Quite fittingly, Peter Ochs places a grand capstone of new vision. While fourteen years ago he called on colleagues to stop doing and begin reflecting, Ochs here presents a plan for SR to serve both CT and RE. Ochs’s vision includes a network of SR “research-and-study teams” (214) testing, proving, and sharing specific hypotheses of repair in both academy and seminary.

24 For insight into this topic from a non-Catholic author, see Christopher A. Hall, Reading Scripture with the Church Fathers (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998).
25 “A Good Word is as a Good Tree: A Muslim Response to the Interfaith Challenges of Vatican II,” 188-200.
In his writings, Ochs has consistently offered SR as a visionary means of repair for what is broken in postmodern society; here, he offers, not surprisingly, a concrete plan for doing SR not for our sake, but for God’s sake (216) so that God’s world may find healing. Whether such hypotheses can be “proven” (in a purely scientific sense) is debatable; but, as a social science, the use of SR to help define limitations and resources for bridging gaps between sets of people may be achievable. This sort of repair—that offers friendship across previous cultural and religious divides—is what Ochs has long claimed for SR.

In this book, each author plays out in some way Rahner’s suggestion of a new epoch: Ford, Hughes, and Murray place Vatican II in its historical and theological context as James did at the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15:15-18); others raise knotty questions of boundaries, as the Council did;28 some propose guidelines for the future yet leave many specifics to be tested and evaluated—similar to the Jerusalem Council’s final dictates (Acts 15:29). In each essay, we find the authors rejoicing and marveling at the work of the Spirit. Moreland’s analogical proposition may offer one way forward; Dakake’s another, especially if Catholics adopt SR-type in-house training as Dault suggests. Adams’ emic-rather-than-etic approach to dialogue surely offers a path for understanding one another’s deepest reasonings. Ochs’s proposal for a network of study teams remains the most concrete plan for moving SR from visionary experimentation to a research arm of theological investigation.

Early in the book, Barnes offers a fitting benediction to this work, reminding us that Dei Verbum “ends with a telling quotation from Ambrose: ‘Let it never be forgotten that prayer should accompany the reading of holy scripture, so that it becomes a dialogue [colloquium] between God and the human reader’” (20). Vatican II may have opened the door to a new epoch, as Rahner suggested. These authors share a conviction that interreligious reading in such an epoch offers a unique opportunity for sacred words to continue their life-giving work as readers wend their way from faith houses to Abrahamic tents and back home again.

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28 The Jerusalem Council required traditional sexual yet minimal dietary Levitical standards which countered pagan rites. For this new epoch, the Christian bias toward a unique “tradition [which] discloses the deep story of the entire cosmos” (Murray, 77) and the looming question of the Magisterium remain.